NOVEMBER 2025

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

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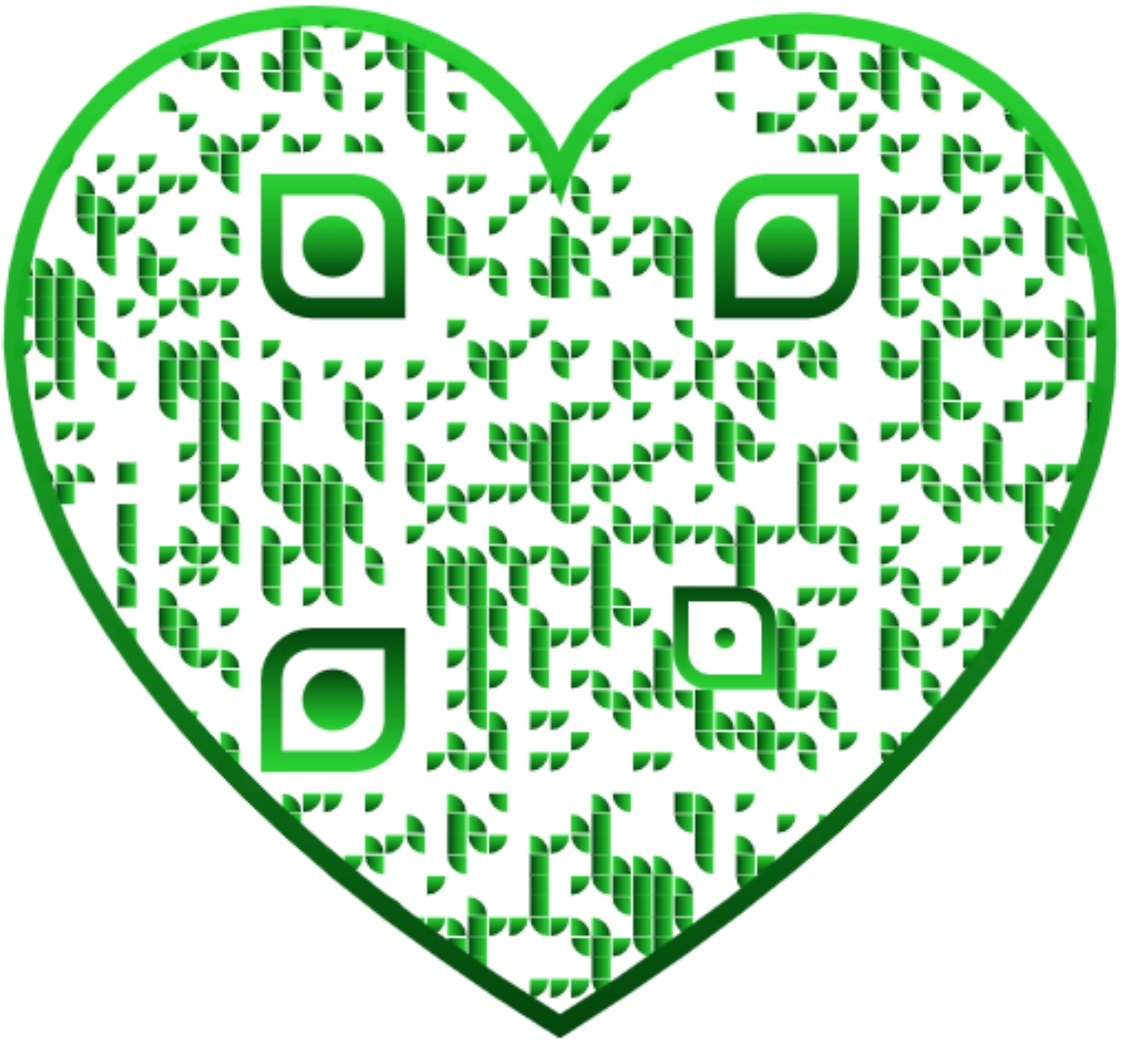

"EMOTIONALLY EMPOWERING.
The artwork is dynamic, elevating the storytelling and amplifying the film's themes."
RogerEbert.com

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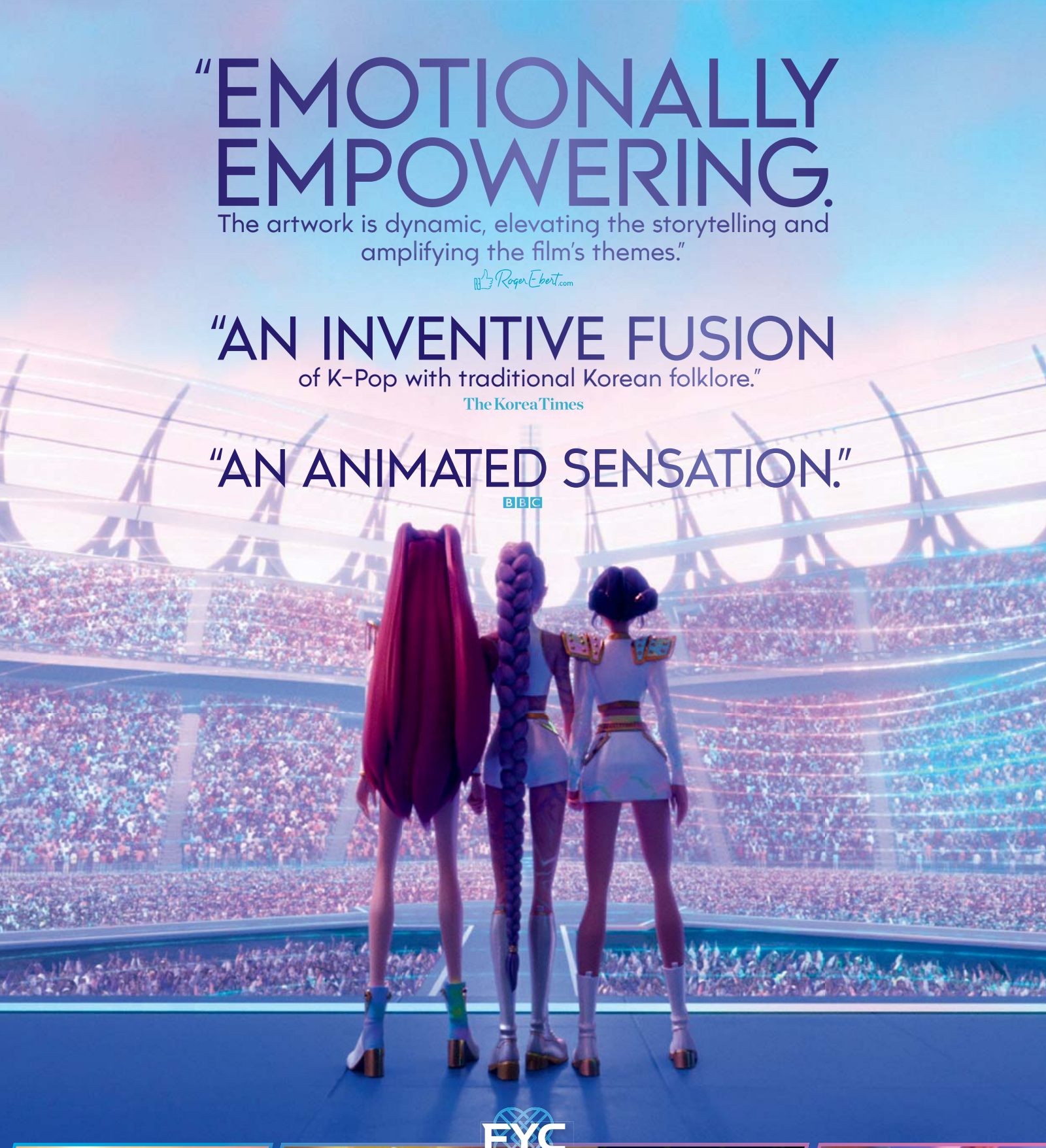
of K-Pop with traditional Korean folklore."
The Korea Times

"AN ANIMATED SENSATION."
BBC



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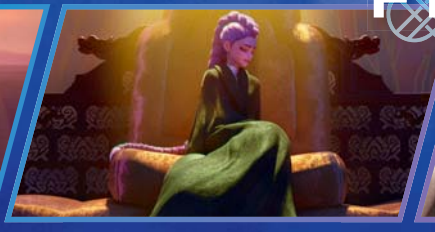

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NOVEMBER 2025

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THE MIGHTY NEIN SHINES ON PRIME VIDEO

+

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THE TWITS

I AM FRANKELDA

THE SISTERS GRIMM

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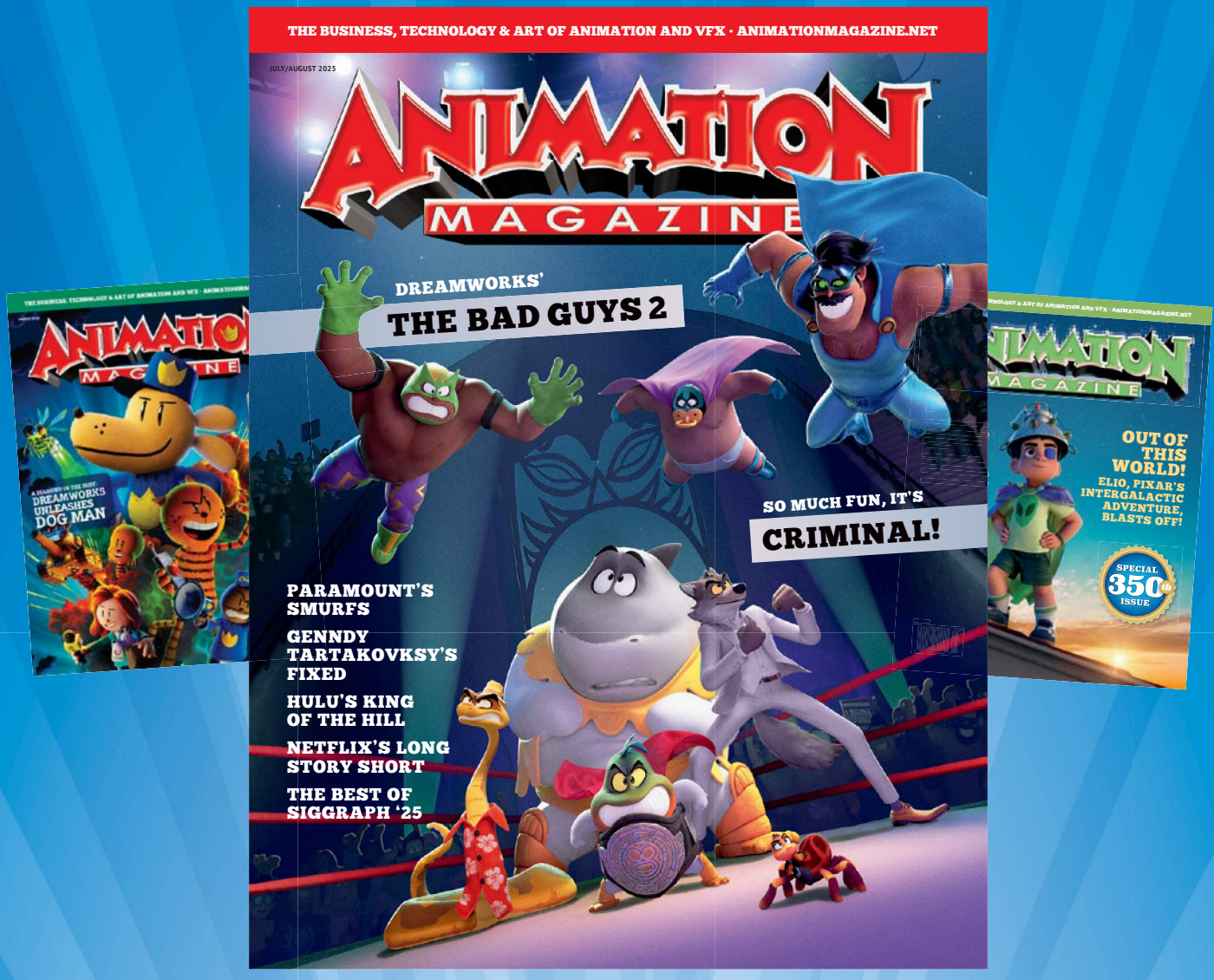

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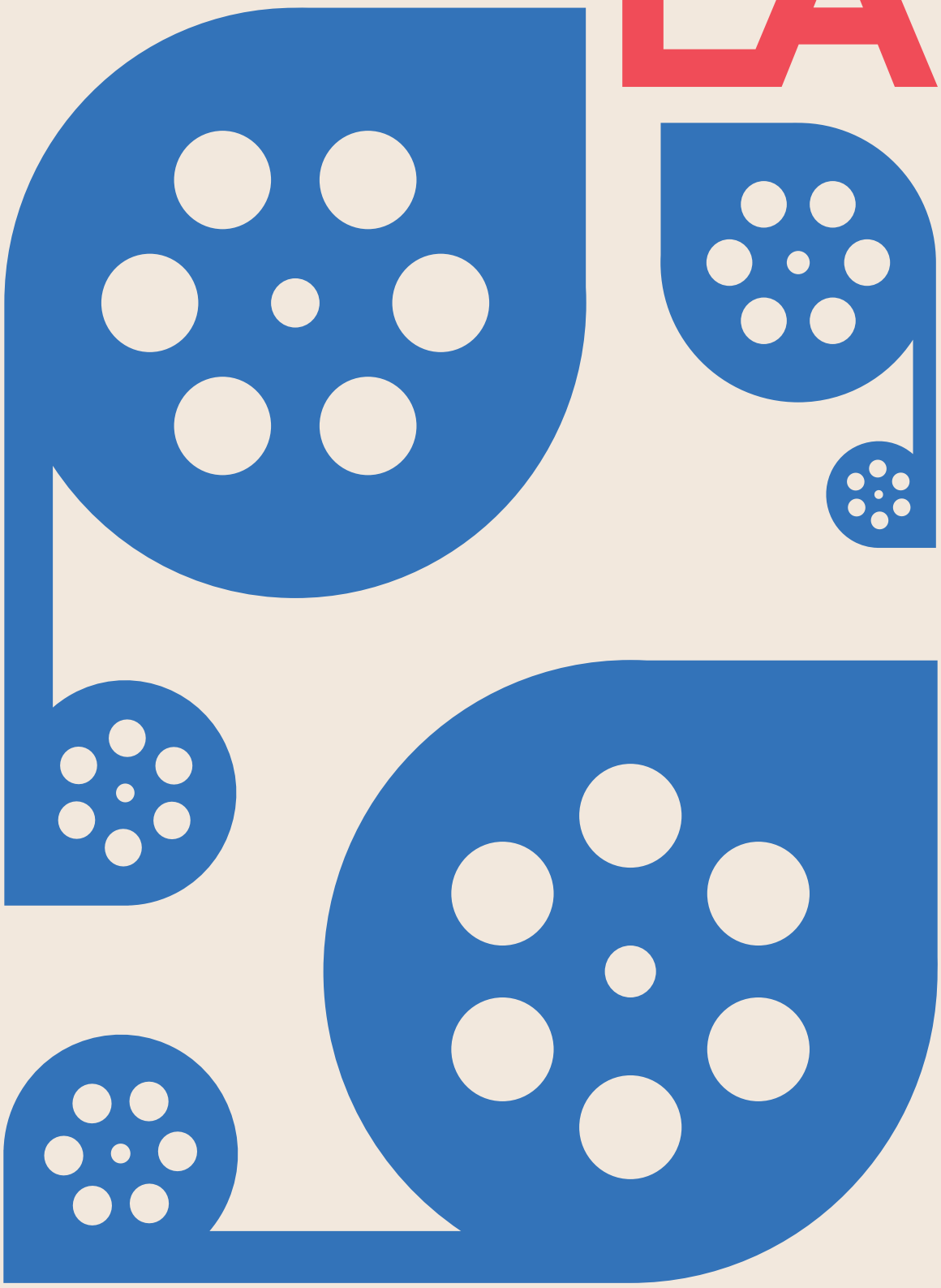

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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2025

VOLUME 39, ISSUE 8, NUMBER 353

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Playing God

Scarlet

FRAME-BY-FRAME

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How directors Steve Hudson and David Nasser put together the young Frankenstein movie, *Stitch Head*, together.

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Talented duo Roy and Arturo Ambriz discuss the creation of their spooktacular film, *I Am Frankelda,* Mexico's first stop-motion feature.

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We pay a visit to the amazing team behind Disney's new preschool show *Marvel's Iron Man and His Awesome Friends* at Atomic Cartoons.

Cover A:
Critical Role's *The Mighty Nein* premieres on Prime Video on Nov. 19.

Cover B:
The Twits premieres on Netflix on Oct. 17.

MIPCOM Cover:
Owen Wilson voices *Charlie the Wonderdog*, the star of Icon's new animated feature, set for a Jan. 16, 2026 release.

I am Frankelda

A Bagful of Frightful Treats

Because this month's issue of the magazine focuses on many of the movies and TV shows that come out in October, there seems to be an abundance of animated fare suitable for bingeing on Halloween night! Our cover story, written by one of our best journalists, Jennifer Wolfe, focuses on Critical Role's new spinoff series, *The Mighty Nein*. If you're a fan of Prime Video's *The Legend of Vox Machina*, you are going to love reading about what showrunner Tasha Huo and the highly creative team at Titmouse have cooked up for our entertainment this month.

The late British author Roald Dahl's dark and twisted books have inspired a wide range of live-action and animated adaptations. Writer-director-producer Phil Johnston's clever take on a slim volume titled *The Twits* premieres on Netflix this month, and it's bound to satisfy those who enjoy the writer's macabre characters and storylines. The project, which was first planned as a six-part miniseries, and then had to be slimmed down to feature length, definitely makes suitable viewing for All Hallows' Eve.

We also have a delicious treat from Mexico, courtesy of Arturo and Roy Ambriz and their stop-motion studio Cinema Fantasma. Their eagerly anticipated feature *I Am Frankelda*, which makes its U.S. premiere at the Animation Is Film Festival this month, centers on a 19th century Mexican horror writer, caught between the real world and her imaginary creations. You can find out all the details of the Ambriz brothers' beautiful labor of love in Kambole Campbell's insightful feature story.

There are also plenty of small-screen surprises in store for animation lovers this month. Apple TV+ has unveiled a lovingly crafted adaptation of Michael Buckley's hit book series, *The Sisters Grimm*. Warner Bros. Animation is premiering Mike Roth's delightful new series *Bat-Fam*, which will bow on Prime Video later this season, while Netflix is introducing *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Deathwatch*, a nail-biter of a show based on Ubisoft's action-adventure stealth game. There's almost an embarrassment of riches, but we try to keep you abreast of everything you have to save viewing time for this season.

One last thing before I head to the nearest Spirit store for some Halloween essentials: If you're in town in November, you won't want to miss our annual World Animation Summit, (Nov. 17-19 at The Garland Hotel in N. Hollywood). In addition to all the big Oscar season panels, keynotes and parties, we have a dazzling line-up of Hall of Fame Honorees (including *South Park* bad boys Matt Stone and Trey Parker; *KPop Demon Hunters* superstar directors Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans; *Love, Death + Robots* and *Secret Level* mastermind Tim Miller; TV animation legend Linda Simensky; and *In Your Dreams* helmer Alex Woo, to name a few). We are announcing more animation rock stars and the full schedule in the next few weeks, so keep checking our website every day for more exciting updates. Until then, hope your trick or treat bag is packed with super-sized chocolate bars and only a few candy corns.

Ramin Zahed
Editor in Chief
ramin@animationmagazine.net

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Put 'demon' in your title and you're good to go! Animated films just lend themselves visually to the big screen experience, and it's a genre that is truly global."

Paul Dergarabedian, box-office analyst at ComScore, after Sony-Crunchyroll's *Demon Slayer: Kimestsu no Yaiba Infinity* set a new record for the biggest anime opening with a $70 million haul in September.

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Best Animated Feature
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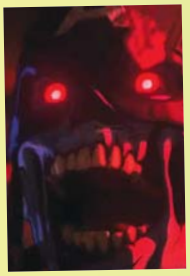
Animation Planner/October 2025


Marvel Zombies

Solar Opposites

Pets on a Train

Haha, You Clowns

Chainsaw Man–The Movie: Reze Arc

ParaNorman

Hazbin Hotel

Stitch Head

Lesbian Space Princess

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain

3

Return to the fantastical world of Pandora in ***Avatar: The Way of Water***, back in theaters today. You can also enjoy the retro CG specters of ***Casper***, re-released for its 30th anniversary.

On streaming, the Avengers are out for *braaains* in the Disney+ event series ***Marvel Zombies***!

5

Catch up with Pim, Charlie and Flint in ***Smiling Friends*** Season 3 on Adult Swim.

11

Producers and broadcasters from around the world will rendez-vous on the Croissette for this year's **MIPJunior** and **MIPCOM** content markets. *mipjunior.com / mipcom.com*

13

The sixth and final season of ***Solar Opposites*** crash lands on Hulu today.

17

The fur flies in theaters as Viva releases the high-speed family adventure ***Pets on a Train***.

Animation Is Film brings critically acclaimed and buzzworthy indie films from around the world (including ***Arco***, ***Decorado*** and ***Scarlet***) to Los Angeles for three illuminating days. *animationisfilm.com*

19

Give a hearty hello to the newest Adult Swim animated comedy, ***Haha, You Clowns***, created by Joe Cappa.

24

Sony brings the devilish mayhem of ***Chainsaw Man - The Movie: Reze Arc*** to cinemas nationwide. Plus, LAIKA fans can catch the Halloween re-release of ***ParaNorman***.

Students and pros will find plenty of animated inspiration at **LightBox Expo** in Pasadena, CA this weekend. *lightboxexpo.com*

29

More not-so-scaries hit the big screen in ***Stitch Head***, a family-friendly spin on *Frankenstein* from Briarcliff Ent.

At home, fans can check in to Season 2 of ***Hazbin Hotel*** on Prime Video, or enjoy the galaxy-expanding stories of ***Star Wars: Visions*** Vol. 3 on Disney+.

31

Get your indie animation fix with the critically lauded animated import ***Little Amélie or the Character of Rain*** from GKIDS, or go wild with sapphic sci-fi hijinks with ***Lesbian Space Princess*** from Aussie directors Emma Hough Hobbs and Leela Varghese, screened by Fandor.

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please email edit@animationmagazine.net

FESTIVALS

Animage
Recife, Brazil
animagefestival.com

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Geneva, Switzerland
animatou.com

Animest
Bucharest, Romania
animest.ro

Banjaluka IAFF
Banja Luka, Yugoslavia
banjalukanima.org

BIAF
Bucheon, S. Korea
biaf.or.kr

Cartoons Underground
Singapore
cartoonsunderground.com

Cinekid Festival
Amsterdam, Netherlands
cinekid.nl

CRAFT Animfest
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
craftanimfest.org

DOK Leipzig
Leipzig, Germany
dok-leipzig.de

Etiuda & Anima
Krakow, Poland
etiudaandanima.pl

Fredrikstad Animation Festival
Fredrikstad, Norway
animationfestival.no

Linoleum
Kyiv, Ukraine
linoleumfest.com

PrimAnima
Budaörs, Hungary
primanimafestival.hu

ReAninimania
Yerevan, Armenia
reanimania.com

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Thessaloniki, Greece
tafestival.gr

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The Must-Have List

By Mercedes Milligan

BOOKS

Walt Disney's Children's Classics
As the holiday season draws nearer, it's time to start shopping for delightful treasures to add to your gift shopping list. This beautiful Taschen compendium penned by *Animag* contributor Charles Solomon is a lovely option for fans of classic fairy tales and Midcentury illustration. This vibrant hardcover explores the legacy of the Golden Books created by Disney artists in the '40s and '50s, spotlighting the work of seven artists across 10 illustrated stories, including *Snow White, Pinocchio, Cinderella* and *Dumbo*.
Taschen / $50

The Worlds of Hayao Miyazaki: The Influences and Inspiration Behind the Iconic Films
The celebration of Studio Ghibli's 40th anniversary year continues with a fresh hardcover dedicated to the "godfather of animation." Written by *Film Comment*'s Nicolas Rapold, the book is an exploration of Hayao Miyazaki's storied career, richly illustrated with shots from his globally beloved films. Readers will discover how Miyazaki pulled inspiration from both Japanese and Western wells of artistry and storytelling, as well as his own life, to create his painstakingly produced, stylistically inventive masterpieces from *Totoro* to *Ponyo*.
Frances Lincoln / $35

MERCH

Speaking of holiday shopping, ahem, may we be so bold as to suggest a few of our favorite recent licensing collabs featuring some animated favorites?

Funko X KPop Demon Hunters
Pop! figs of Mira, Rumi, Zoey & Jinu, plus glow-in-the-dark Derpy with Sussie! *Pre-order at funko.com*

Miniso X One Piece
Highly collectible range of home goods and accessories.
Find stores at miniso.com

Uniqlo X Studio Ghibli
Adult & kid tees and sweatshirts, $15-40. *uniqlo.com*

Converse X Bluey
Limited edition collection of kid & toddler shoes, tees & hoodie, $40-80. *converse.com*

DISCS

Aztec Batman
A new vision of the Dark Knight fights for justice in ancient Mexico! Bonus features: *The Battle Cry of Aztec Batman, The Batman Mythology and Aztec Inspiration. Warner / 4K $38*

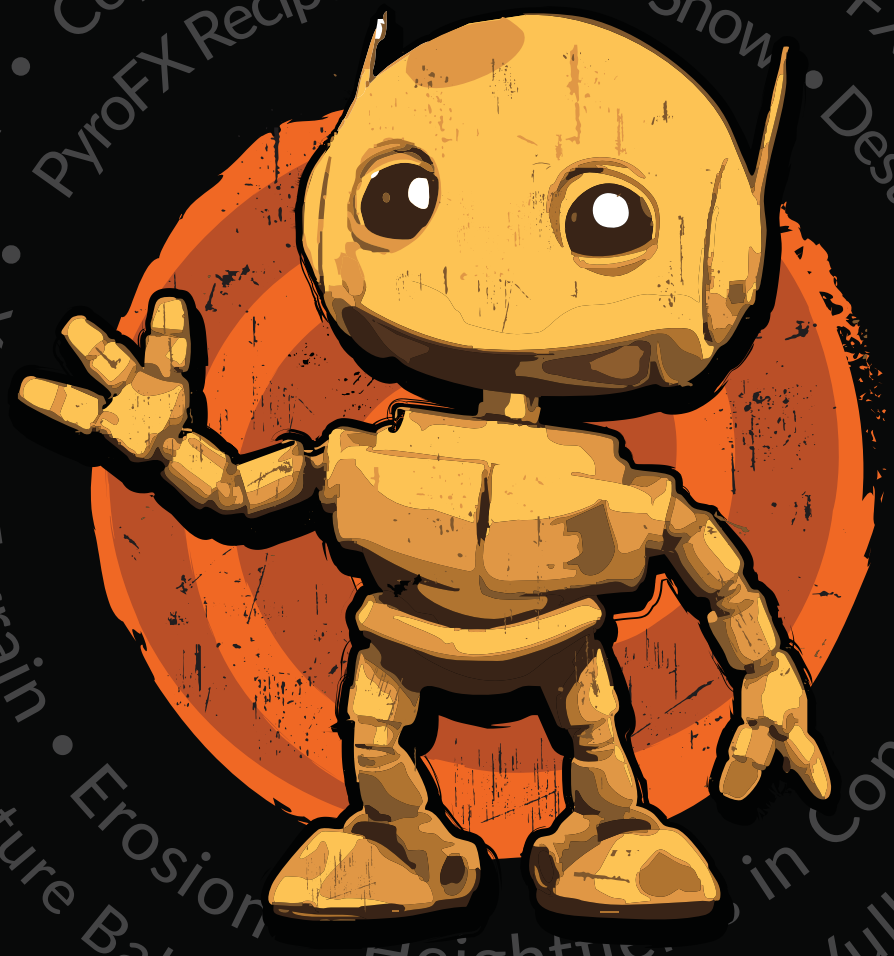
Elio
Explore Pixar's adorable abduction tale with a universe of bonus features, including BTS featurette, voice actor Q&A, art tutorial with Nicolle Castro and more.
Disney /4K $49, BR $41, DVD $27

Castlevania: Complete Series
Deluxe Blu-ray box set, packed with ghoulish goodies like character tarot cards, cel replicas, art booklet and a spirit board.
Viz / $150

Uzumaki Limited Edition
Spiral into Junji Ito's dark world of obsession with this beautiful black-and-white Steelbook.
Warner / $35

Throwback Faves: *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride - Limited Edition Steelbook* (Disney, 4K $43), *Touché Turtle and Dum Dum: The Complete Series* (Warner, BR $28), *Treasures of Soviet Animation Vol. 2* Deaf Crocodile, $20)

Houdini™ 21



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Bob's Burgers

Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans
Directors (*KPop Demon Hunters*)
Movie of the Year Award

Fumi Kitahara
Animation Publicity Executive
Posthumous

Juan Jose Meza-León
Director, *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires*
New Vision Award

Tim Miller
Creator/Exec Producer
Love, Death + Robots, Secret Level

Linda Simensky
Animation Creative Executive
Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, PBS

Matt Stone & Trey Parker
Creators, *South Park*

Studio 100 International
International Studio of the Year

Alex Woo
Director, *In Your Dreams*
New Vision Award

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THE WORLD ANIMATION SUMMIT EARLY LINEUP ANNOUNCEMENT

Award Season Animated Feature Contenders, featuring the directors of some of the year's biggest movies, including

- **Ugo Bienvenu** (*Arco*)
- **Peter Hastings** (*Dog Man*)
- **Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans** (*KPop Demon Hunters*)
- **Pierre Perifel** (*The Bad Guys 2*)
- **Dave Jesteadt, GKIDS president** *(Little Amélie or the Character of Rain)*
- **Alex Woo** (*In Your Dreams*)

View from the Top: Our Annual Animation Studio Head Roundtable

Inside the Wild World of Adult Animation: Class of 2025

The New Preschool Landscape or Will the Next *Bluey* Please Wave Your Tail

Are There Any Jobs Out there? Your 2026 Animation Survival Primer

State of the Business With Today's Animation Gatekeepers

Exploring the Thriving Animation and VFX Scene of Colombia

The VFX Leaders: All about the Year's Biggest Visual Effects Risk-Takers and Awards Contenders

Artificial Preparation: Spotlight on the Dangers & Advantages of Using AI in the Brave, New Animation Pipeline

A Sampler of This Year's Prize-winning, Oscar-Qualifying Animated Shorts

How We Made Our Animated Show—Against All Odds!

And much, much more...

* *Tentative list, please check our website for more up-to-date schedule*

CREATIVE KEYNOTES

Animation star **Jorge R. Gutierrez** (*The Book of Life, Maya and the Three*) offers a sneak peek at his hot, new projects!

Dana Terrace, Emmy-nominated creator of Disney TV's acclaimed *Owl House* and Glitch's upcoming show, *Knights of Guinevere.*

Dana Terrace photo: Guarida Fotante Team/Pixelatt

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THIS YEAR'S AWARD-WINNERS WILL BE HONORED AT A SPECIAL GALA EVENT ON THE OPENING NIGHT OF THE WORLD ANIMATION SUMMIT

MONDAY, NOV. 17

Visit **animationmagazine.net/summit** to purchase your discounted tickets today.

The Couple That Hates Together

Writer-director Phil Johnston shares the long and twisted tale of adapting Raold Dahl's *The Twits* into an unusual animated musical for Netflix.

By Ramin Zahed

A word of warning to young kids who decide to take a chance on Netflix's new animated feature *The Twits*: It's about two of the nastiest, meanest and (yikes!) smelliest people in the world, so beware! But that's exactly what the late British writer Roald Dahl (1916-1990) loved about these characters and what drew Oscar-nominated writer-director-producer Phil Johnston (writer on *Wreck-It-Ralph, Zootopia* and *Ralph Breaks the Internet*) to the project! In fact, Dahl, whose popular children's books have been adapted into movies such as *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory, James and the Giant Peach*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Wonka*, never shied away from unpleasant characters and dark storylines.

The new CG-animated feature, which is one of the final projects completed by Jellyfish Pictures before it shut down due to financial troubles, centers on Mr. and

Petrifying Protagonists: Raold Dahl's brief book *The Twits* was the starting point for director Phil Johnston's engrossing new feature, which features the voices of Margo Martindale, Johnny Vegas, Natalie Portman, Emilia Clarke and Alan Tudyk.

Mrs. Twit, the dreadful owners of a dangerous amusement park, and the two sweet orphans and community of magical animals who band together to stop their evil ways. The labor-intensive project features the voices of Margo Martindale, Johnny Vegas, Natalie Portman, Emilia Clarke, Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, Jason Mantzoukas, Alan Tudyk, Nicole Byer and Mark Proksch. It also features three original songs written and performed by David Byrne and an end title song co-written and performed by Byrne and Hayley Williams.

We had the chance to chat with **Phil Johnston** a few weeks before the film's release on Netflix, and here's what the talented filmmaker shared with us:

Congratulations on the debut of *The Twits* on Netflix after many years of hard work. This is quite a departure from your previous work at Disney. Can you tell us how you and this Roald Dahl story found each other?

Phil Johnston: Back in 2019, when I was still at Disney, they approached me to adapt Dahl's book as an animated series. I wanted to try something completely different, dark and weird, which I couldn't do at Disney. I told them I'll do *The Twits* because it's a slight little book with basically no story about these two reprehensible main characters. I thought it sounded perfect, because then I can build a world around them. The project actually started as a limited series. We had done six of the eight half-hour episodes in full animatic form, and David Byrne had written the music. We were all cruising along and feeling great, and then about two years or so into the project, we were unceremoniously canceled. However, at the time there was an independent film division within Netflix Animation, and we got the OK to reimagine the series as a feature, and that's how we ended up here! So, in this weird way, it created the sort of idiosyncratic structure and tone, because we had all these disparate elements that came together in a new way. There are no two films that have the same journey, and this one has been crazy, but it has also been one of the most creatively satisfying things I have worked on. I have absolutely loved working with [the creative team] on this movie.

PHIL JOHNSTON

I read in one of your previous interviews that you have always been a fan of Dahl's work. Can you elaborate on that?

You know, I had two favorite movies when I was a kid: One, for some bizarre reason, was *On Golden Pond*, and the other one was *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* with Gene Wilder. It was so dark, so weird and so mean, and had such sharp teeth. As a kid, it made me feel a little naughty watching it. I would get the soundtrack album from the library I went to as a kid and listen to it over and over again, and that whole terrifying scene through the tunnel on the boat, all those memories are still vivid in my mind. So, yes, Dahl's books — their comedy is mean, and the world is bad to children, so you learn resilience and fighting. You learn that the world isn't fair and the deck is sometimes stacked against you. I just related to that, and these stories had a special place in my heart … This story, especially, is just naughty, and I felt it uses these two people to tell a strange, grotesque story, which is oddly enough appropriate for today's world.

How did you end up working with Jellyfish

Pictures to produce the animation?
We actually tested three vendors. Jellyfish was based in the U.K., and they have an affinity towards Dahl. They just got it. They were the least experienced for the three we tested, but I liked something about their approach. They were willing to try things that were unusual. The team was all over the world. The main production team was based in Los Angeles. I was based in Vancouver. Our animation director, Jack Kasprzak, was in L.A. Jellyfish studio was in London, and we worked with the Vancouver studio as well. At one time, early on in production, we had artists on five continents working on the movie.

Did having two very unlikable characters at the center of the movie prove challenging at times?
I can read you my pitch from 2020: "I'm attracted to reprehensible characters with horrid judgment who tend to be their own worst enemies! Characters who smell but are unaware or unconcerned with their body odor. Self-awareness is a foreign concept to them! Every time I've written a character like this, it's been a struggle to redeem them. Redemption, after all, is the stuff of family entertainment! Blessedly, it's not the stuff of the Twits. They are unredeemable, and that's the point."

I remember telling this to the artists repeatedly: "The Twits don't change. They're terrible, and we need to accept that." We need to be aware of the fact that some people simply don't change and that became the point. It was really more their story when the project was a series, as opposed to the kids who took a bigger role in the movie. I couldn't have unredeemable main characters anywhere else, so that's why it was fun and interesting to me. Of course, we did get notes, and Netflix has gone through a lot of iterations and multiple leadership and staff changes, so it has been a journey!

The film's visual style is worlds apart from your past movies!
As I was writing the first script, I put together a collection of visual references and almost none of them came from animated films. I didn't want to taint anyone with previous animated movies so that it would be completely original. I was chasing that idea about what makes reprehensible characters appealing, and I think it's about looking for human emotions underneath it all. For example, in the case of Mrs. Twit, I encouraged the artists to find the sadness and regret in the character. Just think of the characters actress Melissa McCarthy plays, for example. They are always angry, but you feel this great empathy towards them. You really embrace the human emotion behind the grotesque behavior.

Mr. Twit is very insecure. He hides behind this gigantic, weird beard. He's quick to anger, but he also believes that he's better than anyone else. People like that put up effigies of themselves all over the place. You can point to our world today and find examples of this type of man. That was our goal without naming names. We also knew that the world was stacked against the children in the movie, but they had to be curious, smart and imaginative, and even a little bit naughty. They could be angry and petulant at times.

In terms of pulling references, I love the work of visual artist Travis Louie. The single biggest reference was from the live-action movies of Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*. In those movies, the edges of the frame are always crowded and chaotic, but you can still focus on the characters in the middle of the frame.

One thing I didn't want was the Twits to be was portrayed as "trailer trash." We needed to subvert that. We needed to instill in the artists that the Twits are inventive and smart. They're also complete chaos agents. Let's not make it so disgusting that it's unappealing. We wanted to create a world that was unusual. Their house is windowless — that's a big part of the book. So, their house could be anything as long as it was windowless. I wanted the town to echo a fictionalized Midwestern town, which is similar to where I grew up.

You talked a bit about the difficulties of shortening the project from a four-hour miniseries to a 98-minute-long feature. What were some of the other challenging aspects?
Looking back, I think there was an element of building the parachute as you're tumbling from the plane towards the ground. There wasn't time for proper development when you're starting with the blank page and going, "OK, what might this be like here?" It

was simply go! While I was writing the script with our co-writer, Meg Favreau, we were also in the early stages of production, so it was a massive challenge. We previsedthe entire movie. Our director of cinematography, Todd Jansen, worked really closely with the storyboard artists. That was something that probably saved us, because we were able to visualize so much of what it was going to look like in advance. It's just easier for executives to be able to picture what something's going to look like as opposed to just having boards.

What do you hope audiences will remember from *The Twits*?

You know, the movie is about empathy and not giving in to hatred and small-mindedness, as much as the world can be very cruel. A lot of the people who are running [the world] are childish; they use playground taunts from on high. I think kids need to know that's not the way we need to live. We need to try to understand each other and not become "twits!" That's what I hope people will take from it. Of course, it's silly and funny and all the other things kids would want from a movie, but the basic message is, "Don't be a twit!" ■

***The Twits* premieres Oct. 17 on Netflix.**

This illustration for one of the key environments in the movie (Paradise Cove and Twitlandia) is one of director Phil Johnston's favorites.

They're Alive!: Described as "*Frankenstein* meets *Monsters, Inc.*," *Stitch Head* features the voices of Asa Butterfield, Joel Fry, Alison Steadman, Rob Brydon and Fern Brady. The film is produced by Sonja Ewers and Mark Mertens, with worldwide sales handled by GFM Animation.

WELCOME TO THE FREAK SHOW

Directors Steve Hudson and David Nasser discuss the making of their indie animated horror feature *Stitch Head*.

By Ryan Gaur

Animation has a great history of light horror. Films like *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas, Coraline* and *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio* are shining examples of how to make a scary movie that plays to all audiences. Looking to follow that legacy is *Stitch Head*, an adaptation of Guy Bass' Gothic-inspired series of chapter books, first published in 2011. The film, produced by the Cologne, Germany-based Gringo Films and the U.K.'s GFM Animation, follows a group of monsters created by a Frankenstein-esque mad scientist as they fight off being kidnapped by the owner of a freak show.

Stitch Head's director, Steve Hudson, was struck by one particular thing when he first encountered the books, which he listened to as an audiobook on a car ride with his wife and children. "It's all about the genre fun," Hudson tells *Animation Magazine*. "A lot of animated movies have their own rules and physics and logic of that world, and you've gotta spend a lot of time explaining that world. But for movies that can hook into an existing genre, there's a lot you don't need to explain. Our kids were pretty young when we were listening to the books, but as soon as you hear about a mad laboratory in a castle, everybody gets it."

Human Monsters

Animation director David Nasser was also enthralled by the idea early on and took an unconventional path to working on the film. He says, "I saw the presentation at [the European financing event] Cartoon Movie 2018 and waited for them to say, 'Great presentation, great movie. If you happen to look for an animation director, I would be very happy to collaborate.' But another project came in the way that I jumped on, and then *Stitch Head* kicked off without me. It was a bit sad at first, but after I finished my project, *Stitch Head* had paused production, and I came back to Cologne for a weekend, had a drink with Steven, who was ready to pick back up, and I rejoined them. I feel super lucky."

Helming an animated movie was a new experience for Hudson, whose directing work

was previously limited to live-action television, alongside his credits as a voice-over artist. Hudson had a steep learning curve but believes that his background in audio offered something valuable to *Stitch Head*. "It's very difficult to tell a joke visually, entirely without sound. It's possible, but 90% of comedic timing is sound. So I thought I'd have something to offer here," Hudson says. "I've been on other productions working with people who've got amazing visual talent and can draw beautifully but [are] not necessarily very good at the stuff that's interacting with performance. With animation, you start with a radio play. The editing, the sound, getting that together. A couple of times I was on other shows where people say, 'We'll make it funny in the animation.' I'd look at it in the end like, 'I don't know if it really quite worked out.' The sound timing, laughs, thoughts, emotions, that sort of stuff has to be right in the radio play."

Along with making an entertaining comedy, Hudson was also keen to preserve the message of the original *Frankenstein* story. "The scary characters in the film are the humans. When the humans form an angry mob, that's what we're scared of these days. The actual monsters are slightly grotesque, but they're super cool and we identify with the monsters, and that's the origin of the whole *Frankenstein* myth. These days the monsters are outsiders, and we identify with the outsiders much more than the proper people." Nasser sees the horror aspects of the film more as a means to get to that core message. "It's not scary at all. It's like a comedy about the characterization of monsters. And the monsters themselves are simply too cute."

David Nasser

Stitch Head's animation has a healthy mix of realism and stylization, something Nasser worked hard to find. "It's always the design that determines the style. You can play within the margins of making it more cartoony, while remembering that the characters are very realistic, so they could end up looking weird," Nasser says. "So the character design already determines 80% of where you can go. It was clear that Stitch Head is a more emotional character, so he needs to be a bit more naturally animated. And then we had the monsters that we would usually have in group shots. We thought they should move more snappily, otherwise the scenes get too heavy and animators work too long on the shots. You have all these factors, as well as new ideas, all the time from this soup of different people working on the film, and in the end, I'm just keeping all the pieces together. With a director, with production, with the artists, I have to be a link between them and make sure that the film gets finished with the style we chose."

Hudson was very specific about how he wanted scenes to be framed in *Stitch Head*. "When we were initially doing the designs, we were thinking very much about this being a handmade world, a hipster universe, so we wanted everything to be nonreplica. Everything is unique and jerry-rigged together," he says.

"There's a word in German called *Wimmelbild*," explains Hudson. "It's like watching those cartoons where you've got 1,000 tiny little pirates fighting on big ships or something, and you can look at it and say, 'Oh, look, did you see that?' And that, for me, is cinema, because you can look at the big screen and notice something small. The audience feels empowered and clever. There's a lot of humor you can do too, especially if you've got a fixed frame and you're not directly leading them with the camera, but the audience's eyes are moving around the screen. We were doing a lot of 'flat is funny' for the gag shots, but in these more emotional bits, you need to come to much more naturalistic and sophisticated animation. We had slightly more naturalistic camera angles, much less of the very static Buster Keaton-style flat frames."

Aiming for Emotions

It's not always easy to find the balance between emotional and entertaining, especially for a film aimed at families, but Hudson believes that the peril in the story is essential for a satisfying emotional experience: "To really earn a feel-good movie, you have to have a certain feel-bad element," he believes. "You've got to really identify and go on a journey with these characters, and the book and the film go to somewhere dark and difficult. Sometimes people don't want to do that too much, but I think kids deserve it. There's the 'make them laugh, make them cry' thing, but to make them cry you need an emotional hook and an emotional journey, you need to walk a mile in somebody else's shoes. If you can do that in the cinema, and especially when you're a kid, it's a big, overwhelming experience that just seemed super important to me." ■

Briarcliff Entertainment will release *Stitch Head* in select U.S. theaters on Oct. 29.

"To really earn a feel-good movie, you have to have a certain feel-bad element. You've got to really identify and go on a journey with these characters, and the book and the film go to somewhere dark and difficult."
DIRECTOR STEVE HUDSON

Roy and Arturo Ambriz discuss the creation of their spooktacular film *I Am Frankelda*, Mexico's first stop-motion feature.

Fantasmas Magníficos

By Kambole Campbell

It's been a busy few years for Cinema Fantasma. The Mexico City-based stop-motion studio, founded by brothers Roy and Arturo Ambriz, is straddling multiple productions. One of those projects is *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*, a television series created by Gonzalo Cordova whose Almodóvar-influenced stop-motion is produced by Cinema Fantasma. Another is *I Am Frankelda* (*Soy Frankelda*) — touted as the first stop-motion feature made entirely in Mexico. It's a gorgeous, handcrafted fantasy musical based on the TV show *Frankelda's Book of Spooks*, and it blew away audiences at the Annecy and Fantasia festivals alike.

I Am Frankelda continues to build buzz ahead of its premiere in Mexico and as it seeks international distribution. At the time of writing, the brothers are in the midst of a new edit of the film (they're looking to make it a little "more agile" than the cut that has been shown at festivals), with some guidance from none other than director Guillermo del Toro (and his

frequent editor Evan Schiff), who helped secure distribution in Mexico.

"It feels like being with Gandalf or in *Hercules* when he's training with [Philoctetes]," Roy Ambriz jokes about the partnership. "Sometimes we are able to meet [del Toro] or to write to him; he gives us some advice and helps us a little bit, but then he goes off on his own adventures."

¡Viva Animación Mexicana!

As for how *I Am Frankelda* became the first stop-motion feature film fully produced in Mexico, Arturo Ambriz says that, historically, the stop-motion animation scene in the country feels like it has slanted toward auteurist short film projects. But the brothers also think that focus is changing. "I think there are a lot more feature films coming here in Mexico, especially in stop motion," he says. "We really want to see them all. There are a lot of people animating in Guadalajara, in Cuernavaca, Puebla, Monterrey. There are a lot of cities that have these, like, stop-motion hubs developing."

Not only a milestone, *I Am Frankelda* is a very personal project in more ways than one. Ambriz's relatives work as artists and managers at Cinema Fantasma, which had its beginnings at their family home. "My father is a project manager, and he helps us a lot to organize the studio," says Roy. Roy's wife, Ana Coronilla, is the art director of the show and the film, while Arturo's wife, Irene Melis, is the film's cinematographer. "My mother is a graphic designer, so she also helps with production but also doing props, doing wardrobe for the characters and painting, and she has a really good eye and a good hand to help us. So all our family is involved in this, and it's the only way in which we can achieve this production being in Mexico."

Beautiful Nightmares: Cinema Fantasma's I Am Frankelda centers on a 19th century writer whose imaginative horror tales are brought to life in a parallel nightmare world. Mexico's first stop-motion feature won the Satoshi Kon Award at the Annecy Festival in June.

I Am Frankelda expanded from what was initially planned as a 30-minute special for HBO Max and Cartoon Network — upon its transition into a feature, the Ambriz brothers had to find funding for the rest of the film beyond the 30 minutes HBO had originally commissioned. They eventually put their own money into the project, pivoting from their original plans to make another feature, *Ballad of the Phoenix* (which was pitched at the MIFA at Annecy Festival in 2022). "Nobody believed that a feature film in stop motion could be

"Sadly, there's nothing more Mexican in this industry [than] when you are young and you're trying to find your own voice, when the older generation sees what you are trying to do, most of them try to block you or to tell you that you are not worth enough."
WRITER-DIRECTOR ARTURO AMBRIZ

Directors Roy (left) and Arturo Ambriz pose with Frankelda and friends.

produced," says Roy. "And we said we have to do it by ourselves and then hope that this film opens up more opportunities."

I Am Frankelda is just as close to home in front of the camera as it is behind the camera — much of the Ambriz brothers' own experiences making art and stop motion in Mexico is tied into the story. "*I Am Frankelda* is the story of the past 10 years for us. Sadly, there's nothing more Mexican in this industry [than] when you are young and you are trying to find your own voice, when the older generation sees what you are trying to do, sadly, most of them try to block you or to tell you that you are not worth enough." Roy says this was represented in the spiderlike monster Procustes, who torments Frankelda. The character draws on an experience the brothers had with one producer who told them to give up on filmmaking and assist him instead.

The aforementioned Procustes is a highlight of the film, and the complications of animating him are self-evident. Arturo says that, during the show, the character only appeared in one scene, much to the relief of the animation team. "He has like three or four shots in the entire Season 1, so everyone was fine, it's manageable." But for the feature film, Procustes turned out to be the character with the most dialog. "And he's always walking, climbing, fighting, yelling, singing, dancing," Arturo adds. "He's a heavy character, and all of his legs have mechanisms, and every hair is hand-poked." The construction team eventually created mini versions of each character from halfway through production to the end. "All of the full shots and long shots, extreme long shots, were created with smaller puppets," Arturo says. "Then it was a lot lighter to animate and to rig." This intensive, handmade construction was preferable to the alternative: The brothers underline that although they experimented with greenscreen, most shots using it got cut from the film.

They also drew on folklore and even nature around them. Roy Ambriz says that their design for a mermaid incorporates the features of an axolotl, an animal that is endemic to Mexico City. The two shout out visual artist Bruce Zick (known for his work with Disney) as a key figure in helping reconcile all their tastes into the design of *I Am Frankelda*. He worked on production design alongside Ana Coronilla and helped create the film's world of monsters, taking inspiration from the engravings of Gustave Doré.

Fantastic Monsters

Other sources influenced the atmosphere of *I Am Frankelda*, and the brothers were conscious of trying to make something that felt fresh, with a different take on Mexican storytelling. "A Mexican high-fantasy piece with monsters, with mythology, with its own language, something that feels ingrained in the Mexican culture but not draining each and every last drop that can be exemplified from stories made outside Mexico," as Arturo describes it.

The film absorbs this culture into its context — it's present but not overt. "The things that are a part of our life are like colonial streets, syncretism and a search about what is Mexican and what isn't," Arturo notes. There's a consideration of assimilation — as the brothers point out, Mexico City has a lot of Parisian details in the architecture and ornaments. "At the same time, we have an amazing Mesoamerican, pre-Columbian culture. So those are the aspects that we enjoy about Mexico, and that's what we really try to infuse in *Frankelda*. You can watch *Frankelda*, especially the parts which are in the real world, and you will not be thinking all the time that you are in Mexico. You just forget about it, but it's there, it's part of the context." ■

***I Am Frankelda* will be released in Mexico this fall.**

FURTHER ADVENTURES IN EXANDRIA!

Following the breakout success of *The Legend of Vox Machina*, *The Mighty Nein* arrives on Prime Video with a bigger canvas, bold visuals and new voices. By Jennifer Wolfe

What began in 2015 as a *Dungeons & Dragons* game among an informal group of self-described nerdy voice actors has since grown into a multiplatform storytelling phenomenon. Streaming its weekly adventures on Twitch and YouTube, Critical Role built a devoted global following that soon expanded into comics, campaign guides and more. Its first campaign inspired the animated series *The Legend of Vox Machina*, which leapt from a record-smashing Kickstarter into a Prime Video hit in 2022. Building on that success, Critical Role is now launching an animated adaptation of the second campaign, *The Mighty Nein*.

Set in Exandria, the fantasy world created by game master Matthew Mercer (*Baldur's Gate 3*) in 2012, *The Mighty Nein* follows a group of fugitives and outcasts who must band together to stop reality itself from unraveling when a powerful arcane relic known as "The Beacon" falls into dangerous hands. Darker, more cinematic and more morally complex than its predecessor, the 2D-animated hourlong series premieres Nov. 19 on Prime Video and was produced in partnership with Amazon MGM Studios and Titmouse.

The Mighty Nein is executive produced by Critical Role founders Sam Riegel (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*) and Travis Willingham (*Marvel's Avengers Assemble*) alongside Mercer and their fellow founders and cast members Laura Bailey (*The Last of Us: Part II*), Taliesin Jaffe (*World of Warcraft*), Ashley Johnson (*The Last of Us*), Liam O'Brien (*Marvel's Avengers Assemble*) and Marisha Ray (*Fallout 76*). They are joined by showrunner and executive producer Tasha Huo (*Tomb Raider: The*

Strange Magic: Set 20 years after the events of *The Legend of Vox Machina*, *The Mighty Nein* chronicles the adventures of a group of misfits who must join forces to save the realm after the powerful relic known as the Beacon falls into dangerous hands.

Legend of Lara Croft), as well as co-executive producers Chris Prynoski, Shannon Prynoski, Antonio Canobbio and Ben Kalina of Titmouse.

Darker Territories

As a longtime Critical Role fan, Huo welcomed the challenge of adapting Campaign Two's sprawling arcs into a coherent television narrative. Willingham is focused on the visual side, from character design and art direction to staging combat sequences, while Riegel deals with sound and performance, overseeing casting, guest stars, ADR and music.

"Whether you enjoy fantasy, whether you've ever played a tabletop role playing game, whether you've ever heard of Critical Role, I guarantee that you will identify with at least one character, their backstory, their regrets, their trauma."
EXEC PRODUCER SAM RIEGEL

As Riegel puts it, the collaboration is "like a three-headed Hydra" — each creative voice distinct but working in concert to bring *The Mighty Nein* to life.

Stepping into the franchise for the first time, Huo says she was drawn to its richly crafted character backstories, noting, "It's crazy how relatable this story is given it is in a high-fantasy world."

That relatability, she explains, is rooted in the personal struggles that shape the characters. "Something we talked about a lot in the writers' room was how every character comes from a place of trauma," she recalls. "We all experience trauma in our own ways. The question was how to bring that into the storytelling, because it's so relevant and immediate."

It's a perspective Riegel shares: "Whether you enjoy fantasy, whether you've ever played a tabletop role-playing game, whether you've ever heard of Critical Role, I guarantee that you will identify with at least one character, their backstory, their regrets, their trauma," he says.

Willingham stresses that the Critical Role team "was extremely lucky in finding Tasha, because it's not every day that such a talented writer and showrunner is also familiar with your IP and has her own perspective on the characters' voices, her favorite moments. That perspective has been beyond invaluable to us. It's also an additional resource that we can lean on in every facet of production."

Production partner Titmouse pushed the boundaries of what was possible for *The Mighty Nein* to help achieve a cinematic, live-action look, says Huo. She recalls sending over scripts with action set pieces that felt impossible to realize, only for the studio to respond, "No, let's go for it. Let's try it. Let's see. Let's push those limits." The results, she adds, are clear on screen.

To simulate realistic lens blur, atmosphere and lighting effects, Titmouse employed VFX tools like Blace Plugins' Depth Scanner to generate depth maps from 2D drawings. "We embrace an ethos of grounded cinematography and strive to make every shot feel as though it's captured through a physical camera," says prop and FX design supervisor Dennis Fries. "Keep an eye out for pentagonal bokeh — our apertures echo the five-sided faces of the Luxon Beacon."

Riegel points to the studio's attention to detail, noting how subtle adjustments to lip shapes, eyebrow poses and eye movements can make or break a scene. "There are a lot of moments in this show where if we don't have the expression perfect, the moment just doesn't work," he says, calling it "an ambitious

swing to aim for a live-action feel, but one that paid off."

The production also leaned on a global team of artists and studios to bring *The Mighty Nein* to life. Overseas partners in Seoul — Production Reve, DR Movie and Edge Animation — provided animation services, while art director Joseph Martinez (*Niko and the Sword of Light*), who was a background designer on *The Legend of Vox Machina*, and character designer and layout supervisor Jess Lackey (*Valorant*) helped define the show's look. Willingham credits supervising director Juno Lee (*The Lego Ninjago Movie*) with "literally holding our hand through every single phase of this show," while Riegel notes that Lee's lensing and storyboarding choices gave the series a more cinematic feel.

Reprising their roles from the original actual play campaign, Riegel voices Nott the Brave, a foulmouthed goblin rogue hiding deep pain, while Willingham returns as Fjord Stone, a half-orc warlock still testing the limits of his mysterious powers. The lineup also includes O'Brien's Caleb Widogast, a human wizard marked by a traumatic past; Ray's Beauregard Lionett, a fierce human monk with a strong sense of justice; Bailey's Jester Lavorre, a mischievous half-demon prankster devoted to her enigmatic patron known as the Traveler; and Jaffe's Mollymauk Tealeaf, a flamboyant, gender-fluid blood hunter with a flair for tarot readings.

They're joined by an A-list roster of guest stars including Mark Strong (*Nine Perfect Strangers, 1917*), Alan Cumming (*The Traitors*), Tim McGraw (*The Blind Side, 1883*), Anika Noni Rose (*The Princess and the Frog*), Ming-Na Wen (*The Mandalorian*), Auli'i Cravalho (*Moana*), Rahul Kohli (*iZombie*), Robbie Daymond (*Date Everything!*) and Jonathan Frakes (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*).

"It's crazy how relatable this story is given it is in a high-fantasy world … Something we talked about a lot in the writers' room was how every character comes from a place of trauma. We all experience trauma in our own ways. The question was how to bring that into the storytelling, because it's so relevant and immediate."

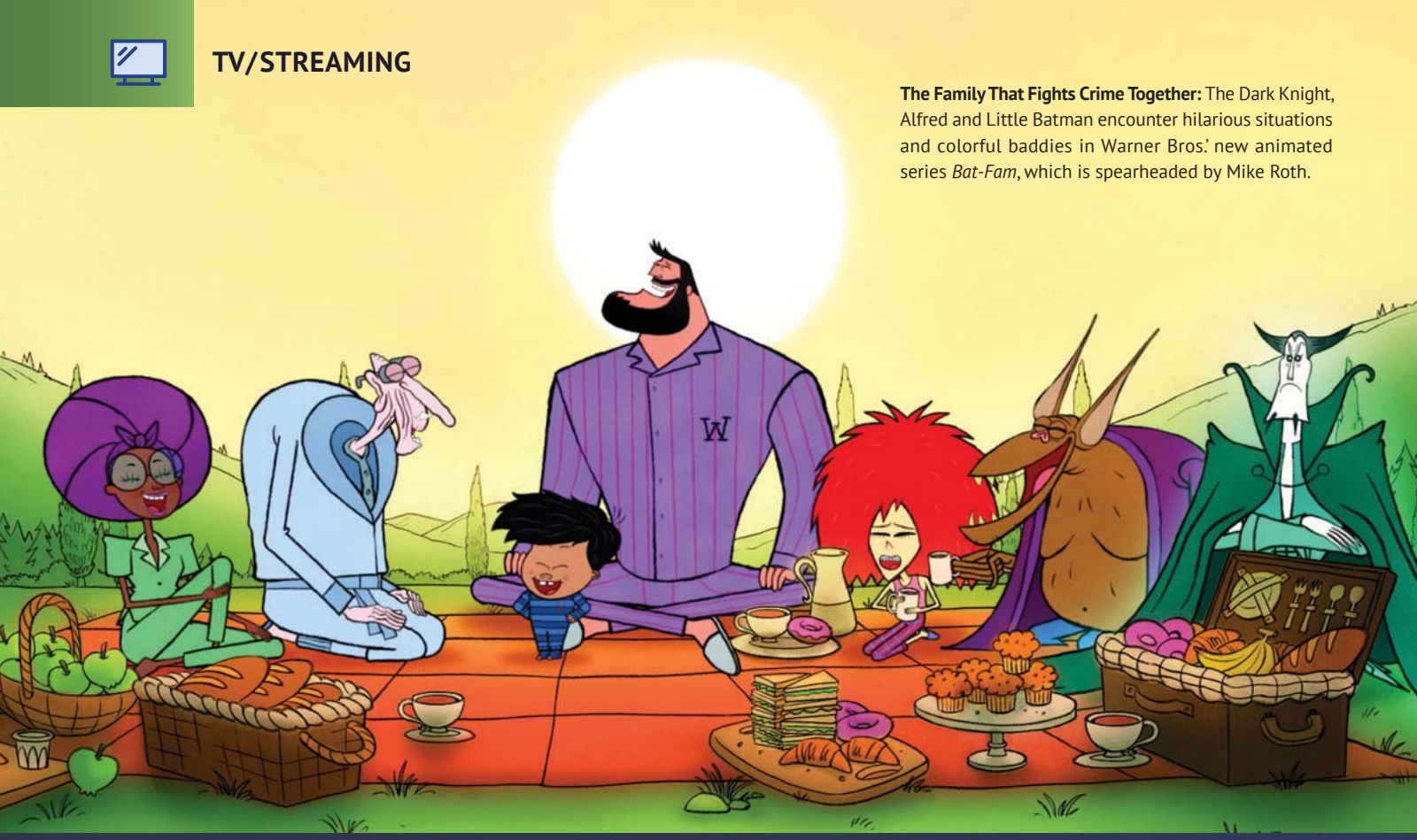
SHOWRUNNER TASHA HUO

Riegel says one of the thrills of the adaptation has been expanding the cast beyond the tabletop group. At the table, "it's just us playing the main characters and Matt Mercer, our incredible game master, doing the voices for every other character in the world." For the animated series, Mercer still takes on several key roles, but, as Riegel notes, "We've been able to welcome incredible talented actors to make the world sound big and expansive and real."

Critical Role's Exandria setting is vast, with three campaigns already completed and a fourth slated for 2026 — leaving plenty of stories still to mine for future series and spinoffs. But for *The Mighty Nein,* Willingham says Prime Video's two-season order gave the team "a much longer runway" to shape the story. "Instead of just making sure Season 1 had a satisfying start, middle and end, we were able to plan on a much larger scale," he explains. With 22 extra minutes per episode and two full seasons to work with, the writers could map character arcs and reveals across a broader canvas, "which is always exciting, especially when you're teeing up a world of this size." ■

***The Mighty Nein* premieres Nov. 19 on Prime Video.**

The Family That Fights Crime Together: The Dark Knight, Alfred and Little Batman encounter hilarious situations and colorful baddies in Warner Bros.' new animated series *Bat-Fam*, which is spearheaded by Mike Roth.



A FAMILY OF MISFITS

After hitting the bull's-eye with *Merry Little Batman*, Mike Roth and his team are back with the clever new series, *Bat-Fam*!

By Jeff Spry

Amid 2023's Christmas rush, an animated film called *Merry Little Batman* hit streaming and became a delightful surprise among Prime Video's seasonal fare. Directed by Mike Roth (*Regular Show*) and featuring the remarkable character designs of British illustrator and cartoonist Ron Searle, it was a sparkling addition to the Caped Crusader's saga.

This month, Roth and his team at Warner Bros. Animation are delivering *Bat-Fam*, an expansion of that quirky corner of the Batman universe swinging from Gotham to Prime Video as a 10-episode series this fall. The project is a collaboration between Warner Bros. Animation, Gigglebug Entertainment in Finland and Dogtooth in Italy. Roth is the series' showrunner and executive produces alongside Jase Ricci and Sam Register. The new show is infused with Roth's sharp comedic timing as we check back in with Bruce Wayne (Owen Wilson) and his domestic duties as a dad to Damian Wayne (Yonas Kibreab) alongside Alfred (James Cromwell), his loyal, world-weary butler.

"The core essence of Batman is always Batman. He's always this stoic, everyday guy. He wins on grit and smarts and experience, and sometimes he fails just like us."
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MIKE ROTH

Prime Video to the Rescue

"Originally, we were going to just make the movie," Roth tells *Animation Magazine*. "But we had that whole kerfuffle when David Zaslav came to Warner Bros., and he had a different vision for the studio and where it was heading. So a bunch of projects didn't get grandfathered in. They believed in the property enough that they wanted us to keep making it, but it wasn't going to exist on HBO Max. Amazon saw *Merry Little Batman* and loved it. There was this feeling of: What else can we do with it? When we became a part of Amazon, that really solidified this notion that, yes, we need to see more of this fun property. When you see it, you want to see the whole DC Universe in these designs."

Anyone who's taken a gander at the distinct style of *Merry Little Batman* would instantly agree with Roth that growing this whimsical spinoff show is a no-brainer. But exactly why is Batman such a malleable hero who can be massaged and merged into so many iterations?

"Yeah, he works really well in the 1930s Batman, where it's just detective work. It works when it's a little more campy in the *Batman '66* stuff. I think it's because he's such a well-defined character, so you can take him and put him in all these situations. But the core essence of Batman is always Batman. He's always this stoic, everyday guy. Even though he's a billionaire, he's still a human being and doesn't have superpowers. He wins on grit and smarts and experience, and sometimes he fails just like us. We stay tethered to the source; we just want to expand it a bit."

When Roth and his team first approached this property, they had all seen Batman in his classic form but wondered just what he would look like as a father. Art director Guillaume Fesquet was instrumental in accomplishing that goal.

"There was a little bit of concern in the beginning," Roth notes. "We didn't want to lose the Batman presence. But we couched him and kept him as a guy who's pragmatic and methodical. He has to control everything in his world, and that translated really well then to his relationship with his son. He's like a helicopter dad, but we can essentially call him a Bat-Copter dad. Here's his son, who wants nothing more than to be Batman like his dad and go out on these huge heroic adventures and vanquish Gotham villains and everything. And here he is and all he wants to do is protect his son. Even though he's a dad, he's still exuding this same Batman energy you'd see with him as a crime fighter; it's just in this microcosm of keeping his son safe."

Dropped into Batman's home life in the wake of *Merry Little Batman*, *Bat-Fam* will introduce refreshing new characters and ex-villains. The series picks up right after the movie, he explains. "Christmas has happened, and other people have moved into the house

like Ra's al Ghul. Bruce has a history of having wards come through the mansion, so he does have this habit of taking in misfits. Ra's had a mishap, and he's been turned into a ghost in this astral form. He still has the bite, but he doesn't have teeth behind the bite. So he's always complaining about how Bruce runs the house, but in Ra's' perspective he was head of the League of Shadows, so he wants Damian to grow up to be that type."

Also along for the ride is Damian's sibling Claire Selton, a.k.a. Volcana. "She also had an accident and nearly died," explains Roth. "She was saved through the Lazarus Pit but stayed in too long. It took a 40-year-old woman and transformed her into a 12-year-old girl. She's a bit snarky and cynical, to the dismay of Damian, who's this spitfire full of enthusiasm and wants to jump into everything head-first and immediately wants to have this close relationship with her."

The show also features Dr. Langstrom, a.k.a. Man-Bat. "He's a former scientist whose cheese has slipped off his cracker a little bit," says the showrunner. "He's like the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. He wears a robe and walks around the house thinking everything he says is ancient Greek philosophy, but really they're just weird non sequiturs. He's a blast, and he's voiced by Bobby Moynihan. Picture a big hairy bat who sleeps in the belfry hanging upside-down and is obsessed with video games."

Another new resident of Wayne Manor introduced in *Bat-Fam* is Alfred's great-grandniece, Alicia Pennyworth, a character who expands the Batman universe.

"You don't really see Batman with childhood friends, but Alicia would spend summers at the house. She'd fly from London and stay there, so she grew up with Bruce and has this sibling-type relationship with him. Because of that closeness, she can stand up to him and dig a little deeper than other people might be willing to go. She has more of a breezy, easygoing nature."

After Batman cleaned up Gotham City in *Merry Little Batman*, many villains took it to heart and reformed, but in this series we learn that crime always has a way of returning. Some of the big bads come back, and Roth promises many cool new villains in addition to a few old foes.

Good Times with the Baddies

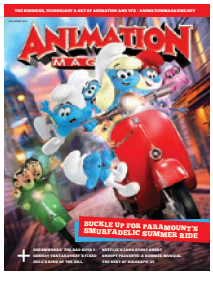
"The lower-tier baddies like King Tut, Copperhead, Giganta and Killer Moth — they've all decided they want to roll back into society, and the reason Alicia came to Gotham is to be their therapist," he adds. "So she sets up an organization called EVIL, which stands for ex-villains, and it's almost like a halfway house, which means that sometimes they come to Wayne Manor for dinner. On top of all that, I think we've got one of the greatest voice casts of any series I've ever worked on. And that's a tall thing to say because I've worked on *SpongeBob* and some pretty illustrious, great shows."

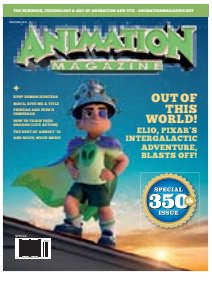
And, of course, it wouldn't be a Batman adaptation without a cool Batmobile for the Dark Knight to tool around in, and *Bat-Fam* might have conceived the most outrageous version yet.

"The Batmobile is such an identity for whichever Batman it is," says Roth. "You see the Batmobile and it's so iconic. Finding that specific Batmobile is super important to any Batman property. So we have this Batman — he's 45, maybe 50. What does a cool car look like to him? He'd be in his midlife-crisis mode. He'd have an Ed Roth/Rat Fink type of vehicle. He'd have a big dragster. Something over the top. So much of who Bruce is comes out of my own being a father. I've got a Mustang Mach-E and it's pretty fun to drive. I don't mind the extra power!" ■

Warner Bros. Animation's *Bat-Fam* premieres this fall on Prime Video.

WHICH ONE DID YOU MISS?





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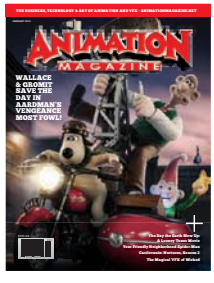

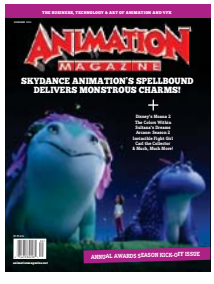

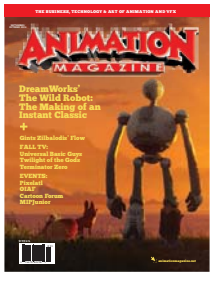

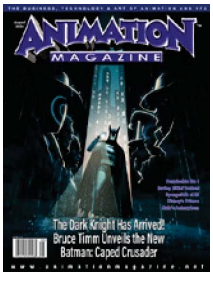

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KPop Demon Hunters (Image courtesy of Netflix, 2025)

Fairy-Tale Beginnings

Exec producers Michael Buckley and Amy Higgins bring the captivating world of *The Sisters Grimm* to animated life in their charming new Apple TV+ series.

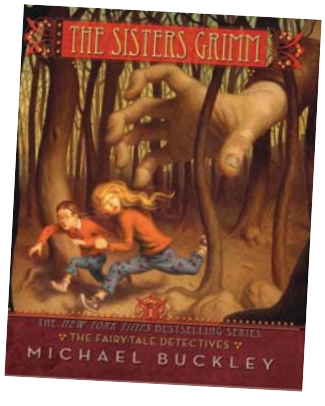
By Ramin Zahed

First published 20 years ago, the fantasy series *The Sisters Grimm* by writer Michael Buckley and illustrator Peter Ferguson captured the hearts of readers with its clever two main characters and fun supporting players inspired by the Grimm fairy tales. This month, a lovingly crafted 2D-animated adaptation of the books arrives on Apple TV+, introducing a new generation of fans and their parents to the entertaining world of sisters Sabrina and Daphne Grimm!

Exec produced by author Buckley and animation veteran Amy Higgins, the show follows the adventures of the siblings as they are sent to live with their grandmother, Relda Grimm, in the mysterious town of Ferryport Landing. After discovering that they're descendants of the famous Grimm Brothers, they slowly realize the town is populated with mysterious magical beings and their evil counterparts. The voice cast includes Ariel Winter as Sabrina, Laraine Newman as Relda, Abubakar Salim as Charming and Billy Harris as Puck.

Putting Pen to Paper

In a recent interview with *Animation Magazine*, Buckley said the original idea for the books popped into his head fully formed. "I actually didn't really need to do too much work on it," says the Brooklyn-based author, who also co-created the 2010 Cartoon Network show *Robotomy*. "I actually wrote it out as a TV pitch originally and took it out to all the places that I had good relationships with. Everyone said they loved it and found it charming, sweet and funny, but they all kept saying that it should be a book, not a TV series. That drove me crazy, because I have ADHD and the idea of writing a book seemed like an impossible task. But I had some friends who were very encouraging, so I started writing it. We sent it out, and a couple of weeks later, I had a book deal, and all of a sudden, I was a children's book author! So, that's what I've been doing for the past 20 years!"



Through the years, Buckley had several offers from various places to adapt the books into a show, but he felt that nobody really understood their heart and soul. "There were people who suggested all kinds of strange changes," he recalls. "Someone wanted me to add vampires in it because *Twilight* was big at the time. Then, there was a producer who suggested that we make the leads boys! Luckily, when I finally found the right producers, they introduced me to Amy [Higgins]; she just gets it. She understood what it was all about and what I was trying to do with it. It's a blessing to find someone who understands your brain."

Higgins, whose impressive list of credits includes fan favorites such as *Kid Cosmic, Star vs. the Forces of Evil* and *Wander Over Yonder,* says she also felt that she and Buckley were on the exact same wavelength from the start. "I loved the books when I listened to the audiobooks with my son, who was eight at the time, the same age as the books' Sabrina," she says. "I just thought the books would be perfect as an animated show that most parents would want to watch with their kids. Also, the main character in the book, Sabrina, is a very complicated girl and not likable at first glance. Puck is very complicated too, and you don't see characters like that in children's animation. They're always balancing the line of trying to do the right thing and being taken off target by their emotions. I wanted to include all of that in the show, and Michael trusted me with his books, and I was very cautious about that. We needed to cut the story down to six episodes and trim it down without losing anything. That was the hardest thing to do!"

According to Higgins, it took about a year to make each episode of the show. The eye-catching 2D animation was tackled by L.A.'s toon powerhouse Titmouse, which used Toon Boom's always-reliable tools, according to the executive producers. Higgins and story editor Todd Casey wrote most of the scripts for the six episodes. "It was really important that the voice of each character was consistent throughout," notes Higgins.

Buckley says he loves how real the characters seem to him. "They are in this magical fantasy surrounding where Prince Charming lives down the street and Snow White's around the corner, but the kids, especially Sabrina, are dealing with real, complicated issues of trauma and trust," he says. "They deal with these problems the way a real kid would, and I think that's what is going to make this show different."

Higgins brings up the fact that the show's visuals have a special storybook quality to them as well. "You get this dappled light of upstate New York in the fall, with all these colors and layers of magic throughout this season," she points out. "On the other hand, I also wanted our Prince Charming to be a regular guy, who is expressing these very human emotions. We also worked with such

Happily Ever After: Exec produced by Michael Buckley and Amy Higgins, *The Sisters Grimm* features the voices of Ariel Winter as Sabrina, Laraine Newman as Relda, Abubakar Salim as Charming and Billy Harris as Puck.

"The visuals have a storybook quality about them. You get this dappled light of upstate New York in the fall with all these colors and layers of magic."
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER AMY HIGGINS

a fantastic team, and I think [it] resulted in a really elevated piece of entertainment that you don't see every day."

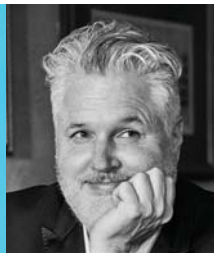
The show's creators also wanted to emphasize a post-COVID uplifting message throughout the show. "One of the main themes of the first season is that you can help make your own story," explains Higgins. "We were coming out of the COVID years, and there were so many families who had gone through these very difficult times, and we really wanted to emphasize that no matter what hardships you go through, you can still create your own narrative."

Buckley says although he has written other books, he feels that *The Sisters Grimm* series is probably the greatest thing he'll ever create. "This is the first thing I ever wrote, and it means so much to me," he notes. "So, handing it over and letting people take care of your kid could be nerve-wracking at times. I would say that the hardest part for me was learning to trust that the people that had come to this project were all there for all the right reasons, and I needed to let them do their jobs. It's just like when the kids get old enough, you have to let them move on!"

Tattoos, Tips and Triumphs

The bestselling writer says it is always wild when he meets people who grew up reading the books. "When I meet them, they are older, and maybe they're sharing the books with their kids now," he says. "You feel like time is rolling along, and we're all getting older. I'm always trying to pull people back down to reality! The other day, a woman sent me a photo of a tattoo of one of our characters, Puck, that she had got on her rib cage, which seemed to be in a very painful place. She said that Puck had been very important to her when she was a little girl, and that she had grown up trying to become more like him. As an author, when somebody gets a tattoo of one of your characters, that's always a big deal for me!"

"They are in this magical fantasy surrounding where Prince Charming lives down the street and Snow White's around the corner, but the kids deal with real, complicated issues of trauma and trust."
AUTHOR & EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MICHAEL BUCKLEY



Since Higgins has worked on some terrific animated shows over the past decade, we asked her to offer some advice to those who want to break into the business. She says, "Things are different now than they were when I started, but what still holds true is that you have to study the shows that you like. Learn all about the turning points, the beats, the layers and the subtexts. Then, you also have to hustle. I think there are a lot of people in this industry who have lots of talent, and there are many who have lots of hustle. Once in a while you get those who have both. But the ones who are tenacious will at least get someone to read their scripts."

Buckley, whose 16-year-old son, Finn, is also a published author, says he always tells his son he must always be ready. "Don't sit around waiting for the door to open," he advises. "When the door opens, you better have everything you could ever need to walk through it. You need to write for yourself and create your own art. Don't wait around for somebody's permission, because you know when the door opens, you want to be as ready as possible."

Higgins adds, "As Steve Martin once said, 'Be so good that they cannot ignore you!'" ■

***The Sisters Grimm* premieres on Apple TV+ on Friday, Oct. 3.**

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BACK IN THE GAME

Showrunner Derek Kolstad opens up about bringing Ubisoft's famous spy to animated life in Netflix's much-anticipated show, *Splinter Cell: Deathwatch*.

By Karen Idelson

There has never been a time when the underworld of hired assassins and spies didn't have a magnetic pull on film and TV audiences around the world. From classic *James Bond* films to the recent *John Wick* series, audiences fill seats to see these characters move through the shadows. This month, the Netflix adult animated series *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Deathwatch* will join the ranks of these hits with its own unique take on the genre.

The series comes with a rarefied pedigree made up of a group of A-list collaborators. The show is an adaptation of the espionage video game franchise *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, created by Ubisoft. The first of the award-winning games was released in 2002. The games feature an iconic spy character named Sam Fisher. A series of tie-in novels following Fisher on his missions as a black-ops agent were also published in the mid-2000s.

A Winning Team

The show is directed by Guillaume Dousse (*Love, Death + Robots*, *Myosis*) and co-directed by Félicien Colmet-Daage (*The Summit of the Gods*). Ubisoft's Hélène Juguet, Hugo Revon and Gérard Guillemot are also executive producers on the show. The series was developed by Ubisoft Film & Television and animation studios Sun Creature and Fost. Around 240 people from the animation studios contributed to the first season of the series, which has eight episodes.

The show has a sleek and sparse look that focuses on the action of the characters and doesn't stray from a subdued colorscape. It's a specific look that hints at the origins of its main characters. The faces of the characters are angular and often without much expression. Nearly all of them have a steely demeanor.

It seems only fitting that the head writer/executive producer is Derek Kolstad, who is known for creating the *John Wick* series.

"The hardest thing is adapting anything, because it came from one medium where it worked very well," says Kolstad. "And you have to realize that for it to work in another medium, it has to be changed. The way I describe it is that you have to pull out the spine and the brain and the heart and then really build around it to keep the soul intact. The easiest way for me to

look at Sam Fisher in the world of *Splinter Cell* is to treat it as a natural extension of everything that came before. It is all history."

He adds, "When we meet him, it's very much like William Munny in *Unforgiven*; it's our old man. It's a guy who has long left the craft, and someone comes to his doorstep, asking for help. It was beginning with a very, very simple story and making sure that the complexity of the world he came from, and the worlds that we are going to hopefully visit in the future, are just layered in the background."

Since Kolstad comes from the world of live-action cinema and hadn't worked in animation before this project, he relied on film references like *Unforgiven*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* when discussing with the animators what he hoped to see onscreen. He found camaraderie with the crew, who were movie lovers.

"That was one of the chief elements; I didn't know how to talk, and so, in many respects, I would just comp the movies I've loved," says Kolstad. "[The animators] did an excellent job, and what they brought to what I wrote made it better. It's just that movie geekdom. It's a love of all these films I've seen that meant something to me. Everything we did is a love letter to the things that came before us. [The crew] would talk about the animation greats that influenced them. And that's where the two would coalesce. It was this joy that we shared in all these things that we loved."

"Everything we did is a love letter to the things that came before us. [The crew] would talk about the animation greats that influenced them. And that's where the two would coalesce. It was this joy that we shared in all these things that we loved."
WRITER-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DEREK KOLSTAD

In addition to its powerhouse crew and collaborators, the show also boasts a notable voice cast. Liev Schreiber voices the main character, Sam Fisher. Also among the actors is Kirby Howell-Baptiste (*The Sandman*), who is simply credited as Kirby and stars as Zinnia McKenna. Janet Varney (*The Legend of Korra*) plays Anna Grimsdottir and Joel Oulette (Netflix's *Avatar: The Last Airbender*) portrays Thunder.

"What I love about the voice actors, which is a world I've been adjacent to because I've done some video game stuff, is that Liev and the whole voice cast bring their A-game to everything they do," says Kolstad. "Liev and the whole cast gave their all. Liev brought to Sam Fisher not only the nuance but also the micro emotions and voice that you can bring to an animated character that give you pause. It's so convincing, and the audience will feel this and the complexity. That's why after listening to him and the voice cast, I feel blessed to have been working with them."

Spy vs Spy: The new adaptation of the Ubisoft game is directed by Guillaume Dousse and Félicien Colmet-Daage, and is written and exec produced by *John Wick* and *Nobody*'s Derek Kolstad.

For Kolstad, working with an episodic medium and with animation presented new challenges. There were also opportunities to explore a different kind of rhythm in the storytelling.

"In a movie, you have to convince the audience you're more complex than you are, because you only get an hour and a half, two hours at max, to tell the story," says Kolstad. "Especially with this genre in television, you can take a moment to breathe. You can take a moment to spend some time with the secondary and tertiary characters that a lot of the best series have. To me that's the greatest thing about TV. You really get to unwrap the onion, layer by layer, and get into the character's psyche. I love that you can expand the world through the character in TV and just allow them some space, which feels like a luxury."

The series, which was in development for around five years, with two years in active production, will premiere Oct. 14. So far, one season has been finished. For Kolstad, Sam Fisher is a classic character who had an immediate appeal, and he hopes audiences will feel the same.

The Killing Game

"When we meet Sam [Fisher], we see that here's a guy that's been working behind what was once called the Iron Curtain, even around the time [the Berlin Wall] fell," says Kolstad. "He feels like he's probably spent most of his life in this area and region. The idea of going back to the United States to get a farm somewhere, to settle down, even though that's probably where he grew up, would be foreign to him now. And I think he retired where he's most comfortable, in these places where he was an assassin. And he probably knows these areas like the back of his hand, professionally. Even though he is quote, unquote retired, he's ready if he's called upon to go back and to serve. And that's how it is for people like this. If you talk to first responders or Special Forces guys, they have 'go bags.' They are all trained to be a certain way, and you can't turn that off just because you retire. And that's why I think he would be there waiting for someone to call upon him." ■

***Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Deathwatch* premieres Oct. 14 on Netflix.**

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MARKET FRESH

A Dozen Hot New Shows to Catch at the MIPCOM Market

Over 10,500 content creators, buyers and executives are expected to land in Cannes for the annual MIPCOM market from Oct. 13 to 16. We have our eyes on these new animated shows that will be introduced at this big event this month:

PEPPER

Produced by: Millimages (France), Bonnie Lener
Co-producer: L'Incroyable Studio (France), Johan Chiron
Director: Nicolas Le Nevé
Distributor: Millimages
Package: 52 x 11'
Target Audience: Kids 6-9
Type of Animation: 2D
Synopsis: What if our dreams became reality? That's what Pepper goes through every day. Each morning when she wakes up, one element of her dreams *literally* lands in real life! This bizarre phenomenon causes a chain reaction of chaos in her life. Luckily, Pepper has a mysterious dream stone that holds the key to reversing the enchantment. Pepper must figure out how to activate it to restore balance before things get out of hand!
Delivery Date: Q4 2026

millimages.com

CAT THE CAT TRIES THAT!

Created by: Mo Willems & Tim McKeon
Produced by: Hidden Pigeon Co.
Format: 7 x 39'
Type of Animation: 2D
Target Audience: Preschool
Synopsis: Cat the Cat loves her friends, her family and trying new things!
Stand-Out Qualities: Based on Mo Willems' *New York Times* best-selling book series for very early readers. The show features relatable songs, audience interaction and beautiful animation by Blue Zoo Animation.
Exec Quote: "We're thrilled to bring this series to market, celebrating Mo's *New York Times* best-selling work and the joy of discovery at the heart of every episode. Cat the Cat is the friend every preschooler dreams of — curious, encouraging, and fearless — asking, 'Do I like that? Will I try that? Yes, I will!'"

hiddenpigeoncompany.com

TUIGA

Produced by: Copa Studio (Brazil)
Written & Directed by: Rodrigo Soldado
Package: 39 x 7'
Target Audience: Kids 4-7
Type of Animation: 2D
Synopsis: A fun-filled adventure about a giraffe who makes deliveries around the world in a balloon and is accompanied by a young girl pilot, a feisty flower and an enthusiastic little rock. This strange team is the most fun delivery service in all of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms! Tuiga the giraffe, Amelia the pilot, Nail the flower and Porridge the pebble bring their own special qualities to this colorful balloon crew.
Standout Qualities: The show stands out because it blends important social messages with captivating storytelling, all while keeping it lighthearted and accessible to children. The series addresses themes such as diversity, friendship and collaboration in a fun and respectful way, and in an ever-changing world, offers a valuable message for both parents and children to celebrate our differences.

copastudio.com

MOG'S BAD THING

Produced by: Lupus Films, Ruth Fielding, Camilla Deakin
Package: 24 min.
Target Audience: Kids and families
Type of Animation: 2D
Distributor: Serious Kids
Synopsis: Mog is the Thomas family's tabby cat who always finds herself in big trouble. The family are hosting a cat show in their garden, which should be Mog's chance to shine. But amid all the excitement, she does a "bad thing," which leads her to hide in the attic while feeling sorry for herself and miss the start of the show. Can Mog find a way to leave her hiding place, make her family proud and save the day?

Standout Qualities: The special, adapted from Judith Kerr's classic storybook, is a beautifully handcrafted, warmhearted and hiliarous animated adventure from the team behind *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and *Kensuke's Kingdom*, and features a star-studded voice cast.
Exec Quote: "Following the huge success of our BAFTA-nominated animated special *Mog's Christmas*, we are thrilled to have the opportunity to bring Mog's funny feline adventures to the screen once more," says Ruth Fielding, co-founder and joint managing director of Lupus Films.
Delivery Date: Q4 2026

seriouskids.com

THE RETRIEVERS

Produced & Distributed by: Sixteen South
Package: 26 x 22'
Target Audience: Kids
Type of Animation: CGI
Synopsis: Set on the streets of Paris, this comedy-adventure show follows two best friends — 11-year-old Molly and her dog, Otis — as they go on a series of hilarious, action-packed, crime-busting missions. Investigating crimes that have frustrated Molly's dad, this detective duo is aided and abetted by a collection of undesirable street animals — a rat, a fox, a cockroach, a stray cat, a seagull, a maggot and a bluebottle — because to fight crime in a city as big as Paris, you need eyes and ears on every corner.
Standout Qualities: High-end CGI animation brings the streets of Paris vividly to life in this series, with hilarious and exciting storylines, appealing characters and great villains to boot.
Exec Quote: "Think *Scooby-Doo* meets *Ocean's Eleven* with a dash of *Ratatouille* in this beautiful, CGI-animated series about an extraordinary girl and her loyal dog who solve impossible crimes with the help of a ragtag bunch of street-smart animals," says Colin Williams, creative director at Sixteen South.

sixteensouth.tv

SUPER GUARDIANS: POLAR RESCUE

Created by: ACOMMZ Co.
Distributor: Bomanbridge Media
Package: 52 x 11'
Target Audience: Kids 4-7
Type of Animation: 3D animation
Synopsis: In the icy heart of the Arctic, a rookie joins a fearless team of heroes who take on wild adventures, help fellow citizens in danger and work as a team to complete impossible tasks. Welcome to Polar City, a frosty wonderland where folks cheer for snowball fights and cozy up in snowy homes.
Standout Qualities: Its depiction of humor, friendship and teamwork.
Exec Quote: Sonia Fleck, CEO Bomanbridge Media, says, "This adorable series is jam-packed with action, laughs and the coolest vehicles and gadgets. *Super Guardians: Polar Rescue* shows young viewers what it takes to be a hero, a friend, a good teammate and a responsible first responder. We're thrilled to add *Super Guardians* to our kids' portfolio and look forward to presenting the series to buyers at MIPCOM."
Delivery: 26 x 11' delivered / 26 x 11' in development

bomanbridge.tv

LOUCA

Produced by: Media Valley (France) and Belvision (Belgium)
Created by: Based on the comic books by Bruno Dequier
Package: 26 x 24'
Target Audience: Kids 6-11
Type of Animation: CG
Synopsis: Louca's a bit clumsy; his grades could be better and so could his football skills! He's just a regular teen trying to figure things out. Then one day, he meets Nathan, who is confident, athletic, good at soccer and full of charm. He's also … a ghost! And for some reason, Louca is the only person who can see him. What starts as a ghostly surprise turns into the unlikeliest of partnerships as Nathan becomes Louca's secret coach in life.
Standout Qualities: The show combines the universal appeal of soccer with coming-of-age themes such as self-confidence, pushing one's boundaries, courage and personal growth. The series is notable for its diverse cast — giving children of all genders and backgrounds the chance to identify with the characters. It also puts strong female roles in the spotlight. Its release shortly after the 2026 World Cup makes it well positioned to tap into the global enthusiasm for soccer.
Exec Quote: Dorian Buehrer, head of global distribution for Studio 100 Intl., says, "*Louca* is a vibrant comedy, blending humor, heart and high school life! Set against the backdrop of the football field, it showcases a wider story of courage, friendship and belief in yourself. With a diverse cast and values which transcend borders, Louca reflects the world young audiences live in and engages them through relatable characters and compellingly comedic stories."

studio100international.com

PABLO: NEXT LEVEL

Created by: Gráinne McGuinness
Produced by: Paper Owl Films, co-produced with Crayola Studios, and exec produced and internationally distributed by CAKE.
Package: 40 x 11'
Target Audience: Kids 5-8
Type of Animation: Mixed media
Synopsis: Pablo's creativity is more important than ever as he tries to make sense of a strange new world where adventres spring from meeting the everyday challenges of school. By recording events in his sketchbook diary, Pablo processes his emotions, and through his drawings, is able to showcase his perspective on the world.
Standout Qualities: This is the eagerly anticipated spinoff from the groundbreaking, multi-award-winning and BAFTA-nominated *Pablo*, one of the first children's series to feature an autistic central character. The show became a global success, airing in more than 190 territories and in 35 languages. *Pablo: Next Level* reflects the real-life experiences of autistic children and is written and voiced by young autistic talent. With fun and humor at its heart, it's more than just a comedy. It's a new way of seeing the world.
Exec Quote: "It's fast and funny and powerful as through Pablo's perspective we see how silly and

nonsensical the world can be and the simple things we take for granted. By seeing life through Pablo's eyes we can see how simple changes could make the world better if we all work together. This is truly an international comedy hit that will change the world by changing how we see it. I am so excited to be working with the BBC, CAKE and Crayola. I am eternally grateful to all the amazing talents that have come together to make it happen," says Gráinne McGuinness, creative director, Paper Owl Films.
Delivery Date: 2026

cakeentertainment.com

CHICKIES

Produced by: Cube Creative
Package: 78 x 7›
Target Audience: Kids 4-7
Type of Animation: CG
Synopsis: *Chickies* follows Chicky, Bekky and Poyo, three curious and cheerful chicks who have had enough of being cooped up. They slip away to explore the world any chance they get, because curiosity is written into the DNA of our trio! Venturing into this vast world becomes a true adventure, with the chicks' naivete inevitably leading to hilarity and a series of disasters.
Standout Qualities: This spinoff from Xilam's hit short-form comedy *Where's Chicky?* allows fans to engage with their favorite characters in a new way, including by hearing their voices for the very first time. The new series also has an extended 7-minute length and provides even more hilarious and educational escapades with each episode.
Exec Quote: Marc du Pontavice, founder and CEO at Xilam Animation, says, "The world of *Where's Chicky?* has brought viewers joy, education and humor for over 10 years, and it's one of our most popular IPs across both traditional broadcasters and digital channels. For us, it's a natural step forward to expand the universe with *Chickies* and bring a longer-form, dialogue-driven series to global audiences, and we're sure both new and existing fans will be highly entertained by the fresh and extended adventures of our cute and mischievous characters."
Delivery Date: June 2027

xilam.com

THE SCARECROWS' WEDDING

Produced by: Barney Goodland and Michael Rose, Magic Light Pictures (U.K.)
Package: 30 min.
Target Audience: Kids and families
Type of Animation: CG
Synopsis: An enchanting story about two devoted scarecrows, Betty O'Barley and Harry O'Hay, who are planning a wedding to remember. When Harry insists on leaving the farm to collect one last thing for their big day, a smooth-talking scarecrow named Reginald Rake swoops in with plans of his own. Chaos ensues, and soon Betty is in danger and everything's at risk. Can Harry get back in time and save the day?
Standout Qualities: Full of heart, humor and adventure, this is a joyful tale about loyalty, love and learning that the most important thing isn't a grand gesture — it's simply being together.
Exec Quote: Producer Barney Goodland says: "*The Scarecrows' Wedding* is a beautiful story of 'love conquers all' and the joy of relationships. The voice talent has embodied these characters wonderfully, and there's great chemistry between Jessie Buckley and Domhnall Gleeson as Betty O'Barley and Harry O'Hay. The animation is looking absolutely stunning, and we're excited to share the film with families this Christmas."
Delivery Date: December 2025

magiclightpictures.com

DINO RANCH: ISLAND EXPLORERS

Created by: Matt Fernandes
Produced by: Industrial Brothers and Boat Rocker Studios
Package: 52 x 11'
Target Audience: Preschoolers 3-5
Type of Animation: CG
Synopsis: A spinoff of the hugely popular *Dino Ranch* series, *Island Explorers* sees the Cassidy clan trade their cowboy hats for explorer hats as they head off to the mysterious and exotic Dino Island. Home to Uncle Jack Cassidy, and teeming with new dinosaur species, humongous insects and prehistoric amphibians, Dino Island offers the intrepid clan a chance to explore a exhilarating jungle, active volcano and a previously undiscovered world under the water.
Standout Qualities: Packed with peril, adventure and fun, the series immerses audiences in fantastical new worlds and introduces them to concepts related to problem-solving, family, community, friendship and taking care of animals.
Exec Quote: Gia Delaney, senior vice president of global sales (kids and family) at Boat Rocker Studios, notes, "*Dino Ranch: Island Explorers* builds on the global success of *Dino Ranch* to transport viewers to an extraordinary backdrop of dino-filled jungles, spluttering volcanos and underwater worlds, fresh from the extraordinary imagination of Matt Fernandes."
Delivery Date: Q4 2025

boatrocker.com

CENTAURI 5

Created by: Unicorn Entertainment and multiple Emmy winner Josh Selig
Package: 52 x 11'
Target Audience: Kids 6-11
Type of Animation: Hybrid (2D and CG)
Synopsis: The series follows the adventures of Titan, a Samoyed laboratory dog who was sent on a mission into deep space. After completing his mission, Titan refused to return to Earth and instead launched Centauri 5, a group of heroic former lab animals committed to helping other vulnerable creatures throughout the universe. Titan also wants to find his father, Roman, who was also sent into space years before but never returned. He is supported by Sophie, a fierce and brilliant wildcat scientist; Limbo, a good-natured sloth who's an expert in AI; Bitsy, a young red panda who is an empath and can feel what others feel; and Drake, a robot who was discarded due to various design flaws, which have turned him into a Luddite who believes technology is highly overrated!
Standout Qualities: *Centauri 5* is a fresh take on outer space. Both the storytelling and the design have more in common with, say, Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* than *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. This is a complex, funny and warmhearted show that will appeal to kids as well as teenagers and adults.
Exec Quote: "With the great success of *Black Myth: Wukong*, *Ne Zha 2* and Pop Mart's Labubu, China has entered a renaissance in the areas of character, gaming, content and toys," says Josh Selig, China Bridge Content founder and co-creator of the series. "These are all uniquely Chinese IPs that travel effortlessly around the world. *Centauri 5* endeavors to follow in their footsteps by bringing together artistic bona fides and commercial licensing savvy."
Delivery Date: Q1 2027 (tentative) ■

ANIMATION IMMERSION

The 2025 edition of Animation Is Film Festival offers a unique chance to take in the best features and shorts of the year on the big screen.

The awards season is getting an early start as many of this year's animated feature and short contenders make their Los Angeles premieres at the wonderful Animation Is Film Festival. The prestigious event, which was founded nine years ago by GKIDS CEO Eric Beckamn, has become *the* perfect launching pad for hot indie titles and studio favorites ahead of the Oscar and Annie Award nominations frenzy. It has also become a great way to meet the auteurs behind some of the year's most buzzed-about movies and shorts before awards season exhaustion kicks in!

This year's eclectic lineup features Annecy favorites such as *Arco* and *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain;* Mamoru Hosoda's eagerly anticipated *Scarlet*; Spanish auteur Alberto Vázquez's latest effort, *Decorado*; and acclaimed indies such as *Lesbian Space Princess* and the well-received Mexican stop-motion feature *I Am Frankelda*. It will also offer attendees the chance to discover the Chinese blockbuster *Nobody*, the country's highest-grossing 2D-animated feature of all time (with over $208.6 million in box office sales), and to check out a preview of Disney's holiday offering, *Zootopia 2*.

"It's noteworthy that after a nearly quarter century run of U.S. studio dominance on Oscar night, the international animated features are now elbowing their way into the discussion like never before."
AIF FESTIVAL DIRECTOR MATT KASZANEK

"Animation Is Film has been around since 2017," says the festival's dedicated director Matt Kaszanek. "It's still just a kid compared to the Annecys and Ottawas of the world, but it's old enough to have some history. Mamoru Hosoda opened AIF with *Mirai* in 2018 (*my* first festival!), returned with *Belle* in 2021, and he's back this year with *Scarlet*. Alberto Vázquez's *Birdboy* premiered at the very first AIF, [and he] returned with *Unicorn Wars* in 2022 and, in 2025, has the stunning *Decorado* for us."

Kaszanek says going to the festival feels like reuniting with old friends, and he loves to see what everyone has been up to. "I also love making new friends. *Arco*, *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* and *Lesbian Space Princess* are all feature animation debuts. I love the opportunity of introducing these artists to a new audience, and I love the idea of riding a rainbow five years into the future and being excited with what they return to us with!"

Beyond all the indie gems and international favorites, Kaszanek says the festival is always a great place to rediscover some of the best animated highlights of the year. "I doubt any of *Animation Magazine*'s readers have even *heard* of this one, but there's a panel on Sunday about this film called *KPop Demon Hunters*, and I think it's gonna be pretty big," he jokes.

"Many of my favorite films in the lineup have had earlier bows at the Berlinale, Cannes, Annecy, Venice, Toronto, etc., so 'undiscovered' doesn't seem quite apt," he says. "Earlier, I mentioned 'old friends' in the context of filmmakers, but it applies to audiences too. Every year I see familiar faces — standing in line, in their seats before the lights go down — and I think to myself, 'Hey, I know that guy, he comes every year!' But after last year's festival, we did a survey of ticket buyers and discovered an excitingly high number of people who had just experienced the festival for the *first* time. So, for the people that applies to in 2025, I like to think that Animation Is Film Festival, as a whole, is the 'big, undiscovered gem!'"

When asked about his take on the state of animation worldwide, Kaszanek says, "I truly don't believe that end-of-year awards are everything, but it's noteworthy that after a nearly quarter-century run of U.S. studio dominance on Oscar night, the international animated features are now elbowing their way into the discussion like never before. What's interesting and exciting will be to see how the American films respond to that. The culture is at its best when the films are engaging with one another and pushing one another to tell stories differently. What an awesome time to be a fan of this stuff!"

Animation Is Film takes place at the TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood (Oct. 13, 17-19). For an up-to-the-minute list of films and times visit animationisfilm.com.

AIF 2025 SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

MONDAY, OCT. 13

7 PM
The Twits (special preview)

FRIDAY, OCT. 17

6:30 PM
Shorts! Best of Annecy
(in collab. with Women in Animation)

7:00
Scarlet (opening night)

8:30
Lesbian Space Princess

SATURDAY, OCT. 18

11:30 AM
ChaO

Noon
Zootopia 2 (filmmaker panel)

2 PM
A Story About Fire
ParaNorman (newly restored)
The Thrifting (new short)

4:00
Arco (centerpiece)

5:00
Decorado

7:00
All You Need Is Kill
Shorts Program 2

9:00
Chainsaw Man — The Movie: Reze Arc

SUNDAY, OCT. 19

Noon
I Am Frankelda
Pretty Pretty Please I Don't Want to Be a Magical Girl
(work-in-progress & filmmaker panel with Kiana Khansmith)

1:45 PM
Shorts Program 1

3:00
Little Amelie or the Character of Rain
(closing night)

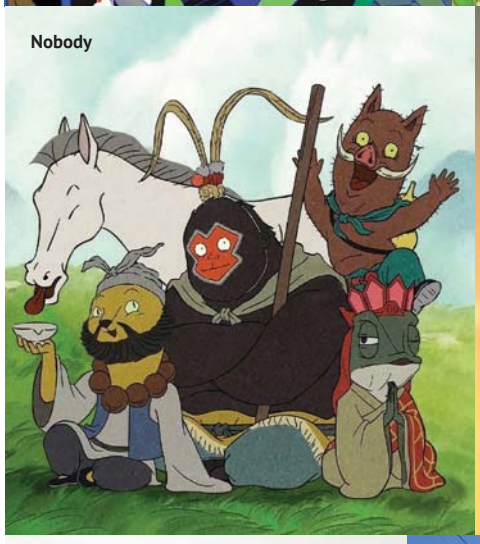
3:30
KPop Demon Hunters (filmmaker panel)

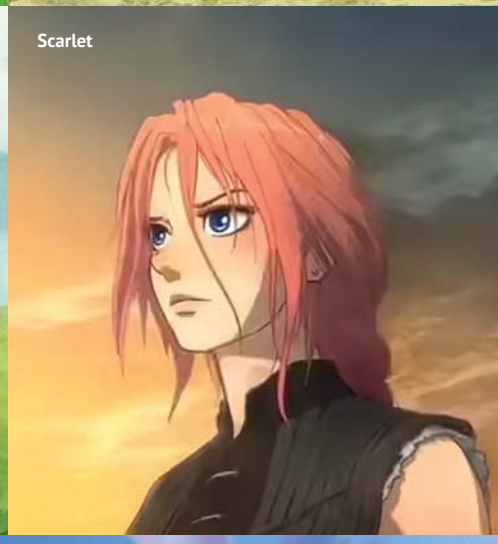
5:30
Nobody

5:30
Shorts Program 3 (student showcase)

Lesbian Space Princess

Arco


Nobody


Scarlet

A Story About Fire

All You Need Is Kill

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain

GOING OFF THE GRID

VFX Supervisor David Seager details the digital wizardry involved in bringing *Tron: Ares* to the big screen.

By Trevor Hogg

A sentient AI being uploads itself into the real world and embarks on a dangerous mission in Disney's fall release *Tron: Ares*. This is the new wrinkle in director Joachim Rønning's fresh take on the franchise, which originated with the 1982 trailblazing film about a young computer engineer who finds himself in a digital world. While much of the action of the new movie takes place outside the virtual realm, the visual effects shots still totaled over 2,000 — with contributions made by ILM, Gmunk, Distillery, Image Engine, Lola VFX and Opsis under the supervision of David Seager.

"You can still look at it and go, 'That's a Light Cycle, Recognizer or an Identity Disc.' But if you pick it up and look closely at it, it has those textures."
VFX SUPERVISOR DAVID SEAGER

Tron: Ares' visual elements had to look consistent with the franchise's past but be reconfigured to fit within a more grounded environment. "If you were to do a close comparison between our Light Cycles next [to] the ones from *Tron: Legacy*, we have bolts, seams, handle lines, carbon fiber, plastic and metal," says Seager, the film's VFX supervisor. "Real-world materials and thoughts have gone into, 'How would you build this?' All of these different things that have their real-world analog[s]. Darren Gilford, our amazing production designer, worked on *Tron: Legacy* and he drove this as far as trying to find that link. You can still look at it and go, 'That's a Light Cycle, Recognizer or an Identity Disc.' But if you pick it up and look closely at it, it has those textures."

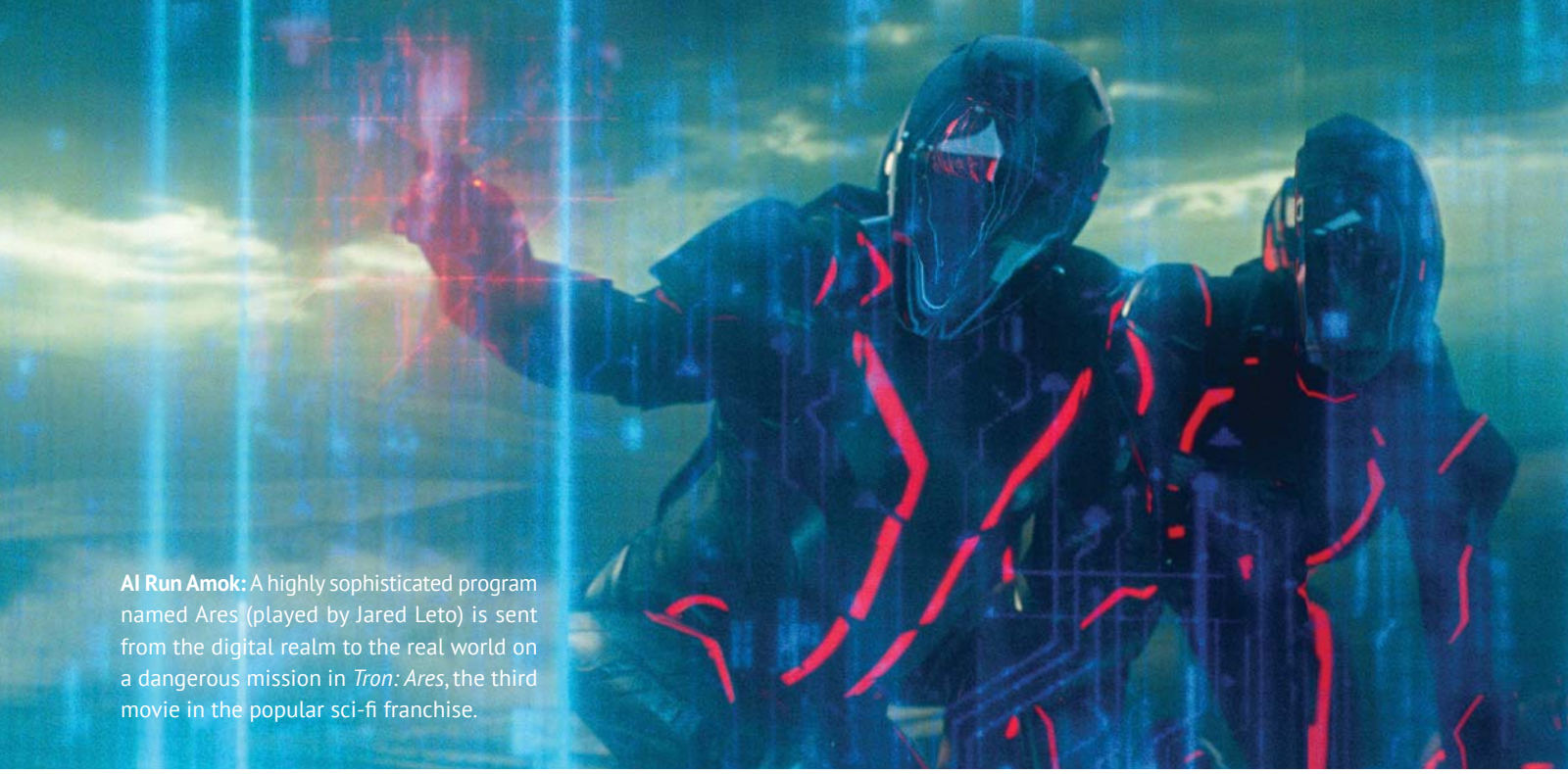
Reflections of Reality

Seager admits that the visual effects did not always closely follow the laws of physics, as the narrative ultimately reigned supreme. "There were embellishments," says Seager. "You can't have *Tron* without a Light Ribbon, which is something bigger than real-world technology. But we treated it for real. We looked at the Light Ribbons and went, 'What are we going to pretend this is made of? It's in the middle of the street.' We shot all of our photography in real-world locations, so it has reflections and refractions of the real street."

The team used state-of-the-art visual effects tricks to put the fictional high-tech inventions in a real, believable space. "We have some vehicles that fly, lay down Light Ribbons, and those Light Ribbons magically stay put in the air, much like the aerial scene at the end of *Tron: Legacy*," explains Seager. "There are those times where you tip the cap and go, 'Yes, we are still *Tron*.' What I appreciate about what Joachim brought to the film was [his] being purposeful about that and not letting everyone be random."

Seager points out that in the first two *Tron* films, Light Cycles seem to appear out of nowhere. "There's that amazing shot in *Legacy* of Sam jumping, [and] it forms around him and off they go," he recalls. "However, that couldn't happen in the real world, so we dealt with that in a different way. It's those kinds of things that are truly a violation of physics in that respect. We're like, 'No. Let's look at some 3D-printing technology, where it's at, and come up with our sci-fi version of how 3D printing might work on a large industrial scale in the sci-fi world.' That's how the vehicles get printed in the real world."

Of course, visual effects work is made easier when it's based on detailed, realistic concept art. "*Tron: Ares* is the first film that I've worked on where I saw real-time methods used in a design sense as much as they were," notes Seager. "Darren had artists on his team who worked exclusively in Unreal Engine. They don't work in 2D at all. In some of these cases with ILM,



AI Run Amok: A highly sophisticated program named Ares (played by Jared Leto) is sent from the digital realm to the real world on a dangerous mission in *Tron: Ares*, the third movie in the popular sci-fi franchise.

we would be able to go to them and say, 'Here is this world that we have to build for this Grid and here is this Unreal Engine file where it is modeled to a degree.' Those artists aren't working to a level of precision that we need for final visual effects, but it's way better than just a 2D image where you have to go and extrapolate from that. Even to review the Light Cycle, at times Darren would bring me into his office and have the director put on the VR helmet; he would sit there, walk around and look at the latest 3D art."

Real-world locations and geographical details had a significant impact on the script and what was filmed during principal photography in Vancouver. "You have to sit there, and [the] location manager goes, 'We can get this or that intersection.' Then you look at the two and go, 'This doesn't fit.' Then you start to modify and fit the locations. In the post-vis, you try to make it as real-world-centric as possible. There was a lot of scouting around Vancouver. I live in Vancouver, so I'm familiar with it. All of us up here were going and trying to find locations. There is one major location in the film that we happened upon. We were going between two of the locations that we were scouting for and literally all of us were going, 'Ooooh. What's that?' The location manager did her job, and we secured that location for the film."

Seager also notes that a full spectrum of sets was constructed for the Grid environments. "At the far end of the spectrum, we had the smallest percentage," he says. "It was the blue room, which is a blue floor and walls, and we're only getting the people. Next up, there were a couple of sets where we had a camera-ready floor and then bluescreen. But we had a handful of sets, one of which was almost complete. There is the point where you have to expose the ceiling for the lighting department, but it was fully encompassed outside of that and built to the aesthetic that Darren and his team had created.

"That set was the reddest room you have ever seen," he continues. "Every line was red. I remember when I got my first tour of it as it was being built here in Vancouver at Mammoth Studios. I took some photos which were shared with some other supervisors at ILM. One of them said, 'That art looks great,' and I replied, 'That's not art. That's a photograph of our set.' It's almost so otherworldly that your brain doesn't look at that [and] believe that it's a real thing."

Chasing the Perfect Visuals

The special effects team, led by Cameron Waldbauer, made major contributions to a scene where a police car in pursuit gets sliced in half by a Light Ribbon emitted from a Light Cycle. "They built a cop car that was pre-sliced, we drove it, it was somewhat steerable, and special effects had it so it would divide," explains Seager. "We cranked the frame rate on the camera, put as many cameras on it as possible and [shot] it on a bridge in the middle of the night. One take, the car flops weird. 'Let's do that again.' We kept at it. I can confidently say the final product uses what we shot. There might be times that you replace a lot of things, but I find that if your first step is trying to do it in reality, it's the best thing you can do to have a solid product. You're not starting from the world of fantasy. You're beginning from, 'This is what the lighting and wetness on the pavement was like.'

"We have a big vehicle called the Dart, which is a giant tank that we drove through downtown Vancouver, crashed cars with and replaced it later with a digital version," he adds. "Economics play into it: The practicality of shooting and trying to find that threshold of, 'You can get this far and then I'll build upon what you were able to achieve.'" ■

Disney's *Tron: Ares* invades theaters on Oct. 10.

Tech Reviews

By Todd Sheridan Perry

Boris FX's SynthEyes 2025.5

Boris FX has rolled out SynthEyes 2025.5, and while it isn't a complete reinvention of the matchmoving (camera tracking in VFX) wheel, it's a smart, focused update that smooths out some long-standing pain points and adds a few genuinely useful tricks. If you've wrestled with messy tracking data or cursed at lens-distortion exports, this release is aimed right at you.

The headline feature is ML Motion Estimation, a new tracking mode that leans on machine learning to generate dense per-pixel motion vectors. That might sound like marketing jargon, but in practice it means fewer headaches when dealing with tricky footage — think handheld shots with motion blur or anything obscured by passing objects. The tracks simply hold better, solves are cleaner, and you spend less time in cleanup mode. For a task as time sensitive as matchmove, that alone is worth a look.

Another standout change is the new nondestructive lens workflow. Previously, managing distortion across different formats often felt like playing a shell game — distort here, undistort there, and hope your export settings didn't trip you up. Now, distortion can be applied or removed at export without affecting the base solve. It's cleaner, more predictable and easier to manage across pipelines whether you're sending data to Maya, Blender, Nuke or anything in between.

There's also a small but very welcome feature: mesh-to-tracker parenting. Drop a piece of geometry into your scene and snap it directly to a tracker, and it stays put through refinements and exports. It's one of those quality-of-life additions that doesn't sound exciting on paper but pays off immediately once you're laying out objects or testing track alignment.

On top of those core changes, the update also polishes existing features. The Mask ML system, introduced earlier this year, now has dilation controls that make it easier to deal with fine details like hair or motion blur. Format support has been broadened as well, including Blackmagic's URSA 17K BRAW, which means SynthEyes continues to keep pace with current production cameras. Add in some workflow niceties — automatic handling of rotated metadata, a proper LUTs folder for color management — and you get the sense that this is an update designed by people who know exactly what slows artists down.

Pricing hasn't changed, with subscriptions starting around $325 a year or a perpetual license for about $655, which keeps SynthEyes competitively positioned against other trackers on the market. When you factor in the stability improvements and smarter automation, 2025.5 feels less like an incremental patch and more like a release that makes the software sturdier, faster and simply more pleasant to work with.

SynthEyes has always been a specialized tool — indispensable to the artists who need it and invisible to everyone else. With this update, Boris FX doubles down on that philosophy: no gimmicks, just solid improvements that make matchmoving a little less of a grind. If you're already a user, you'll notice the difference right away. And if you've been looking for a reason to test-drive it, 2025.5 might be that nudge. ■

Website: borisfx.com/products/syntheyes
Price: $27 (monthly), $655 (perpetual), $215

Marvelous Designer

CLO Virtual Fashion's Marvelous Designer 2025 doesn't overhaul the program, but it does refine the workflow in meaningful ways. This release focuses on cleaner simulation, better export options and thoughtful improvements that make the day-to-day experience smoother. Given the improvements to mesh quality, setup time and animation flexibility, the update feels worthwhile for anyone who relies on the software regularly.

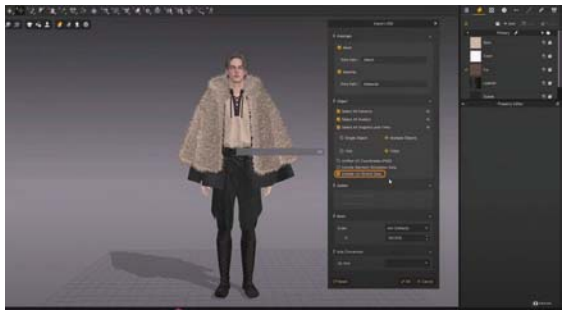
The interface has been reorganized to reduce clutter and make tools easier to find. It isn't a drastic redesign, but the changes are noticeable by how quickly you can move between tasks. It feels more efficient, especially when managing complex garments.

Simulation quality is stronger thanks to a new quad-mesh engine that reduces triangulation, producing cleaner topology for export and rigging. IK joint mapping has also been improved, so avatars imported from Daz, Mixamo, Character Creator or MetaHuman align more accurately and require less manual adjustment.

In this update, animation has gained flexibility as well. In previous versions, you were limited to adjusting caches. Now, you can keyframe fabric properties, wind settings and avatar joints directly in the timeline. Testing layered cloth effects is faster, and the process feels more integrated.

The introduction of a beta fur strand system adds early support for basic hair and fuzz effects. You can preview strand density, length and curl, and export them as USD splines. It's not production-ready for hero assets, but it's already useful for look development and previs.

Other practical enhancements add up quickly. UV generation now accounts for sides and backs of garments. Auto-sewing and



fitting are more accurate, sculpt tools are more responsive, and the modular garment library makes it easier to reuse and adapt designs. Export workflows benefit from PBR support, updated stitching options, two-way zipper presets and better OBJ handling. Texture management has also been streamlined, making the software more reliable in production pipelines.

Marvelous Designer remains a specialized application — indispensable for artists working with digital clothing but less likely to be touched by those outside that space. The 2025 release builds on that foundation with practical updates that strengthen its role in pipelines for film, games and real-time projects. It's not a flashy release, but it is a dependable one.

For character artists, costume designers and simulation specialists, Marvelous Designer 2025 offers a set of improvements that translate directly to faster, more reliable work. It may not grab attention with big new features, but the refinements here make the software easier to trust, and that's what really matters in production. ■

Website: marvelousdesigner.com
Price: $39 per month, $280 per year; $1,900 per year (stand-alone enterprise)

SideFX's Houdini 21

With the August release of Houdini 21, SideFX shifted focus to refining and unifying its tool sets, while still delivering a few forward-looking advances. Featuring more than 300 enhancements across animation, simulation, rendering and machine learning, the update offers a comprehensive end-to-end workflow designed to keep artists working inside Houdini rather than bouncing around multiple applications.

The animation system is one of the biggest beneficiaries of this release. A new motion mixer and animation catalog give animators nonlinear workflows for blending, layering and reusing clips. The AutoRig Builder and ragdoll-tether constraints expand the rigging tool kit, while the "Scene Animate Prop" node allows objects to be animated and triggered in context. Together, these features help streamline the way character and prop performances are built, adjusted and reused across sequences.

Houdini 21 introduces the Otis solver, a GPU-accelerated soft-tissue system that can simulate muscle, fascia, skin sliding and collisions in near real time. The demo character, "Otto," highlights how naturalistic motion can now be achieved without prohibitive computation times. Importantly, setups can be transferred to different characters — even nonhuman ones — while machine-learning-trained deformers offer a faster alternative for artists who need convincing results without full simulations.

With this release, the long-anticipated Copernicus context graduates from beta with GPU-driven tools. Artists now have access to real-time Pyro FX, reaction-diffusion patterns, shape scattering and texture-baking workflows. Pyro itself gains new presets for fire and smoke, debris simulations with the updated MPM solver and added controls for turbulence and noise. The emphasis is on speed and iteration, enabling vfx teams to visualize results faster while retaining fine control over detail.

The OpenGL viewport has been replaced with a modern Vulkan-based renderer, bringing ambient occlusion, geometry lights, Gaussian splats, Hydra 2 integration and MoltenVK support for macOS users. In Solaris, Karma XPU has been updated to handle more complex shading setups, allowing up to 16 shader layers to be combined. The result is a viewport and rendering pipeline that gives artists higher fidelity and faster iteration across lighting and look development.

Rather than headline-grabbing AI, Houdini 21 uses machine learning in targeted, practical ways. Corrective joints, deformation speedups, point-cloud surfacing, style transfer and up-res tools for simulations are all implemented as nodes. This approach ensures artists remain in control of the creative process while benefiting from meaningful efficiency gains.

The release rounds out with improvements across procedural modeling and environment creation. Terrain erosion has been redesigned for greater realism, while quad-remeshing, unsubdivide SOPs and improved UV flattening tools strengthen everyday modeling tasks. Unified GPU-accelerated baking in both Karma and COPs further reduces iteration time.

Houdini 21 emphasizes stability, speed and production readiness. Instead of chasing entirely new workflows, SideFX has refined and expanded the existing tool sets, ensuring they are reliable enough for large-scale use. For animators, riggers and vfx artists alike, this release represents a confident, polished step forward — one that makes Houdini a more accessible and efficient tool for studios looking to deliver complex work under demanding schedules. ■

Wesbsite: sidefx.com
Price: $1,415 per year (Houdini Core), $3,369 per year (Houdini VFX),$195 per year (Karma Renderer), $525 per year (Houdini Engine)

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose recent credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.

Software reviews were written after being tested on a Puget Workstation AMD Ryzen Threadripper PRO 7975WX 4.0GHz 32 Core 350W: 128GB DDR5-5600 RAM and NIVIDIA RTX 6000 Ada Ge 48GB PCI-E. (pugetsystems.com)

The Sadness of Abandoned Creations

Director Matteo Burani reveals all about his award-winning stop-motion short *Playing God*.

By Ramin Zahed

A clay sculpture comes to life and is haunted by his imperfections in *Playing God*, one of the most haunting stop-motion projects of the year. Directed by self-taught Italian writer, director, designer and puppet creator Matteo Burani, the short introduces an unforgettable world of sculpted figures who are too aware of their shortcomings. The short, which has won several prestigious festival prizes this year (including top awards at Animayo, Tribeca and Corto Dorico) is bound to become a strong Academy Award contender as well.

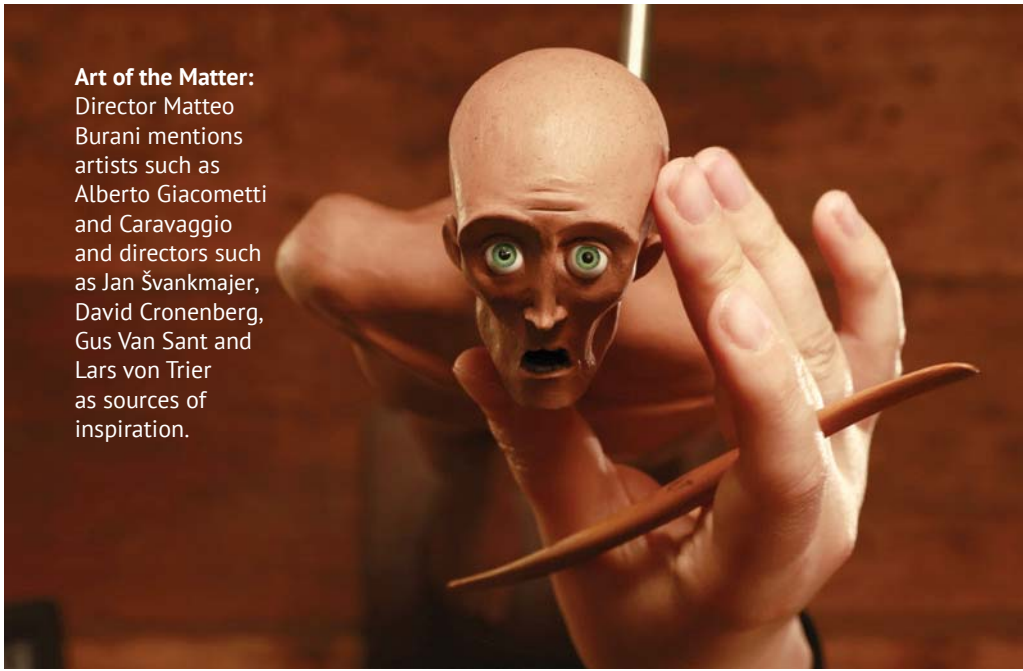
"*Playing God* was born from my desire to explore creation not only as an artistic act but also as a metaphor for human fragility through the medium of stop motion, with the challenging idea of combining three different animation techniques — puppet animation, clay animation and pixilation — into a single film," Burani tells *Animation Magazine*. "The material itself, clay terracotta, was a tribute to one of the masterpieces of my hometown Bologna, Niccolò dell'Arca's *Lamentation Over a Dead Christ*, a sculpture that has haunted me since childhood."

Born of the Same Clay

The director says the project was initially conceived as a few-minutes-long short focusing on the dialogue between the creator and creation. "It started almost as a personal redemption project, during a period of burnout in our stop-motion career," he recalls. "We were working as a puppet maker for other productions, never fully satisfied, reflecting on our role as creators and on our abandoned creations. Over time, though, the story grew with a deeper awareness: It wasn't only about the bond between a sculptor and his creature but about the unavoidable presence of 'the others.' From this, the world of the film expanded: Soon, a fragile community of figures appeared around the sculptor and his creature, all born from the same clay."

According to Burani, the short began development back in 2017. "For years, the project advanced in a stop-and-go rhythm, mostly due to lack of funds. The COVID-19 pandemic made things even harder. But instead of giving up, we reacted by founding our own company — Studio Croma Animation — in 2021. Thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign and the support of Italian national and regional funds, the project finally gained momentum. The partnership with French production [company] Autour de Minuit, along with CNC (French National Center for Cinema) support, completed the budget. The animation itself took 15 months of nonstop work, followed by three months of postproduction. In total, *Playing God* was nearly seven years in the making — a true odyssey, but one that eventually led us home."

The short was made by a highly dedicated

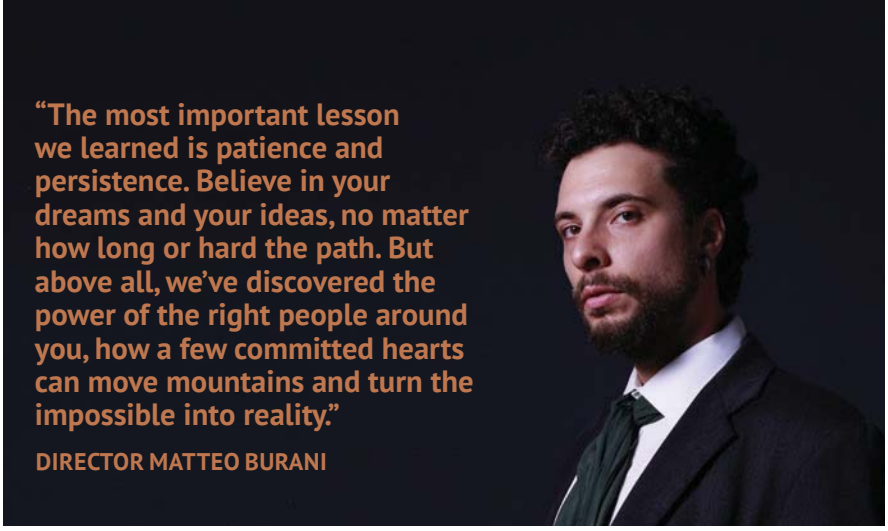


Art of the Matter: Director Matteo Burani mentions artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Caravaggio and directors such as Jan Švankmajer, David Cronenberg, Gus Van Sant and Lars von Trier as sources of inspiration.

team of six. All the animation was done by a single animator, Arianna Gheller, who was also the producer of the short. Burani also performed as the pixilation actor on set, as well as contributing as a set dresser, puppet maker and production designer. Gianmarco Valentino worked on the visual development, animatic and co-wrote the story, supporting the project from the very beginning. Guglielmo Trautvetter, the director of photography, brought the aesthetic vision to life. Sole Piccinino crafted over 90 clay puppets, and Pier Danio Forni provided the memorable music for the dialogue-free short. "The secret of *Playing God* was a collaboration based on friendship, respect and mutual support, working together to create something meaningful when most people deemed the project an insanity. We feel this spirit perfectly reflects the core message of the film itself," adds the filmmaker.

The production made 90 puppets using terracotta-colored clay and built with complex internal ball-and-socket armatures. All of them, including the main character, stood around 22.8 inches tall, which is quite unusual for a stop-motion production. "We wanted to truly bring each creature to life, making them tangible and closer to us," says Burani. "Every puppet has its own personality, a specific character design and even an imagined backstory that helped us create a deeper connection with the audience."

Burani further explains that the main character has an unusual story. "His design didn't actually exist when we started shooting," he admits. "We couldn't settle on his face, yet we had already begun filming. The first scenes we shot were the morphing clay sequences during the creation scene, so at the beginning we worked with just an undefined armature. Step by step, as we animated frame by frame, eyes, mouth and facial features began to emerge. In the end, the character naturally took shape out of the raw material itself."


"The most important lesson we learned is patience and persistence. Believe in your dreams and your ideas, no matter how long or hard the path. But above all, we've discovered the power of the right people around you, how a few committed hearts can move mountains and turn the impossible into reality."
DIRECTOR MATTEO BURANI

Animating sequences that combined clay animation, puppet animation and pixilation was by far one of the most difficult challenges for the artists. "Working with these huge clay puppets meant that every single frame took an enormous effort," says Burani. "Sometimes it took us 40 minutes just to capture one image. In the end, every frame was literally a different sculpture, making consistency while embracing clay's natural imperfections a constant struggle. Some takes lasted for weeks and seemed endless. One of the most surprising discoveries for me was how meditation helped: By convincing myself I wasn't really there at that moment, I could bring blood flow back into my limbs after they started going numb within the first 40 minutes. Believe it or not, it works … sometimes!"

The Gift of Life

As his creation finds new audiences around the world with each festival screening, Burani says he's most proud of the expressive humanity he and his team achieved. He notes, "The characters truly breathe with emotion, like tears, saliva, subtle muscle movements, all crafted frame by frame in camera without any CGI. For me, that's real magic: watching the impossible come to life, connecting the world of puppets with that of human beings."

Burani says he hopes his short leads to a bittersweet reflection on identity, marginalization and self-awareness. "The film shows how the pursuit of perfection can lead to rejection, but also how accepting oneself and others can provide a sense of belonging. I see the short as an anthem for the marginalized, the overlooked and the outcasts: Those who, together, may one day awaken as the true majority. My greatest hope is that the film not only evokes strong emotions but also sparks a deep reflection on who we are, how we relate to each other and how we navigate the pressures and illusions imposed by the world we live in." ■

***Playing God* has qualified for Oscar shortlist consideration. Visit autourdeminuit.com for more information.**

A DAY IN THE LIFE

With the new TV fall season in full gear, we thought it was a good time to visit the wonderful team behind ***Marvel's Iron Man and His Awesome Friends*** at Atomic Cartoons. The show is currently airing on Disney Jr. and Disney Channel.

1

When it's time to Armor Up and make a show, the team at Atomic Cartoons is always happy to help with the assistance of the Iron Friends!

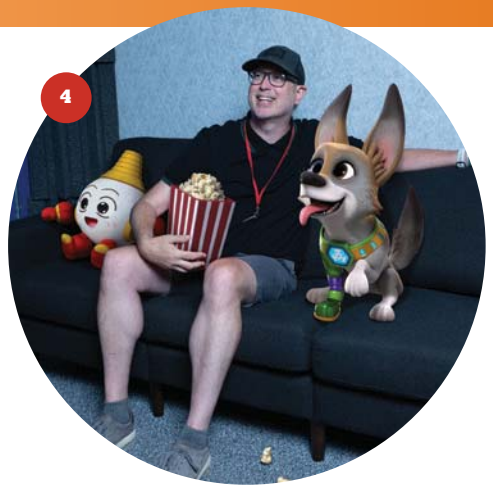
2

Every meeting is filled with entertaining characters including showrunner/exec produer Sean "The Cowboy" Coyle, co-exec producer and story editor James "Iron Man" Eason-Garcia and art director Kevin, "The Pirate" Phibbs.

3

Above: Producer extraordinaire Ashley Rideout keeps everything running smoothly, much to Swarm's dismay.
Right: Supervising director Michael Dowding reviews some totally awesome animatics with the help of Gamma.

4



5

After a busy morning of animation, everyone needs to refuel, even Absorbing Man. (From left) Jorge Romero, Sherry Li, Alvaro Bataller Torre, Juan Carlos Polanco, Michael Dowding, Alyssa Zarate, Albert Szostkiewicz and Marlon Engel.

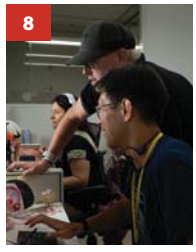
6

When you love what you do, you wear it with pride. (From left) Thom Lu and Maree Fletcher.

7

As the afternoon rolls around, supervising producer Alex Cichon, producer Ashley Rideout, associate producer Mairi Macfarlane, supervising director Michael Dowding, and directors Aynsley King and Kyle Manske enjoy some of the latest lighting.

8



Time to review animation – Vision is a pro! (from left) Bogdan Kondriuk, Lesley Hung, Michael Dowding and Blanca Montes.

9

Everybody likes a pizza party at the end of the day, especially Ultron's henchbots, Nuts and Bolts. (from left) Julia Goncharenko, Abdelrahman El Masry and Wade Cross.

10

As another awesome day comes to an end, the Iron Friends must armor up and help save the day. Thankfully production manager Aleks Wiebe is there to help them out!

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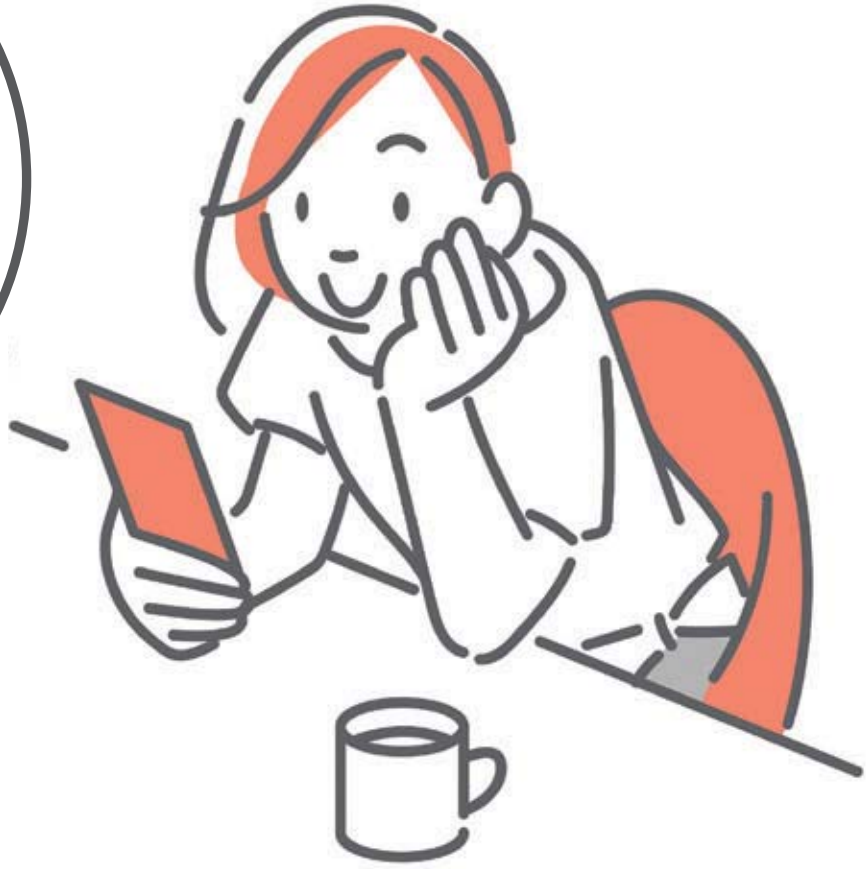


AnimationMagazine.net/newsletter

"HUNTR/X'S BIG INSPIRATIONAL BALLAD 'GOLDEN' IS SPECTACULAR."

IndieWire

"GOLDEN" IS THE FIRST-EVER SONG BY FEMALE K-POP ARTISTS TO REACH NO.1 ON THE billboard HOT 100

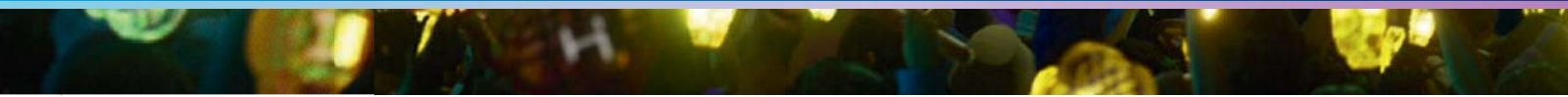
FYC

K-POP DEMON HUNTERS

BEST ORIGINAL SONG

HUNTR/X IS THE FIRST GIRL GROUP TO TOP THE HOT 100 SINCE DESTINY'S CHILD IN 2001

HUNTR/X IS THE HIGHEST-STREAMED FEMALE K-POP ACT EVER ON Spotify



"ONE OF THE MOST

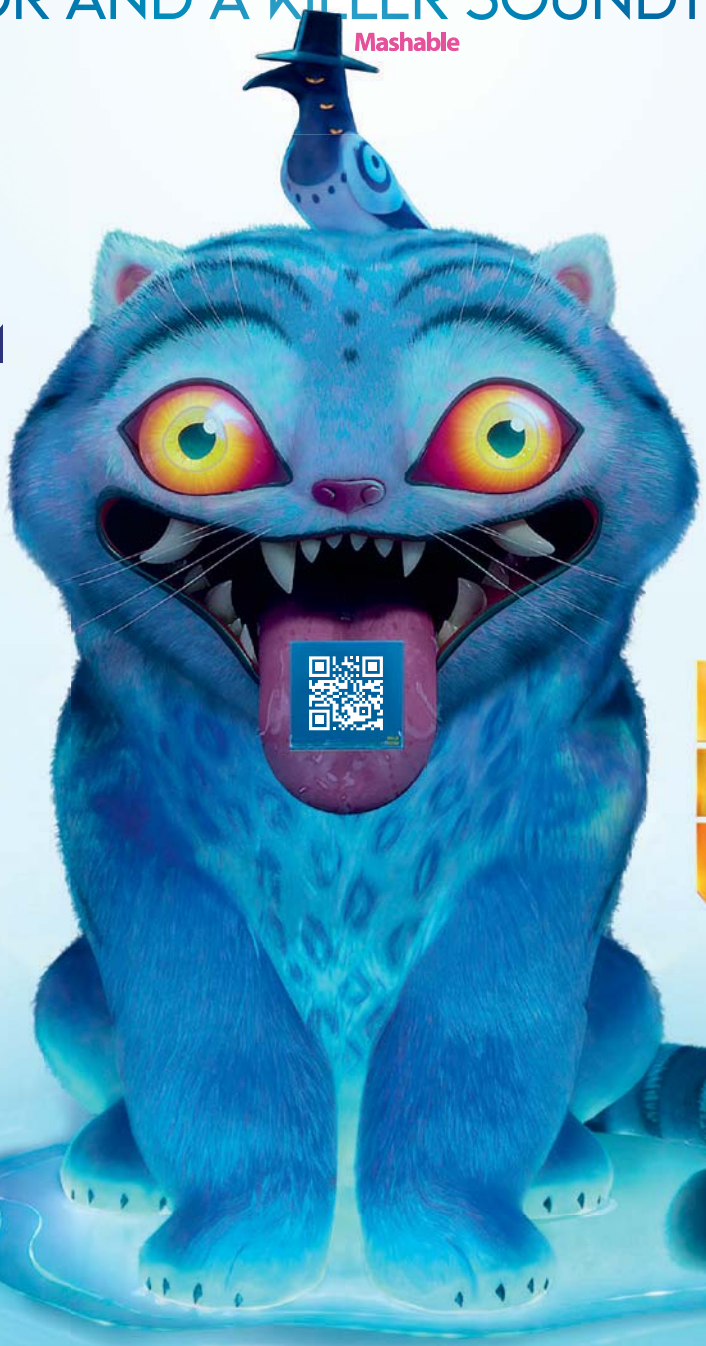
DAZZLING SURPRISES OF THE YEAR.

A love letter to the power of voices bringing people together."

NBP

"A VISUAL FEAST WITH HEART, HUMOR AND A KILLER SOUNDTRACK."

Mashable



THE **ANIMATED FILM** OF THE YEAR

THE **SOUNDTRACK** OF THE YEAR

FYC

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE
BEST ORIGINAL SONG
"GOLDEN"

K-POP DEMON HUNTERS

CERTIFIED FRESH
Rotten Tomatoes
95%
AS OF SEPT 15

SONY PICTURES ANIMATION